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Charlotte Emerson

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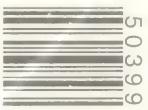

BETH'S SNOW DANCER

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by Charlotte Emerson
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BETH'S SNOW DANCER
JO'S TROUBLED HEART
MEG'S DEAREST WISH

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The Little Women Journals™

BETH'S SNOW DANCER

Charlotte Emerson

Illustrations by Kevin Wasden

AN AVON CAMELOT BOOK

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BETH'S SNOW DANCER

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CHAPTER ONE

Party Planning

"Oh, I can't wait for our Christmas party!" Amy March exclaimed, running ahead of her sisters down the lane. "Two weeks seems so very long!"

"You won't make it come any sooner by running to meet it," Jo March called after her with a laugh.

The three March sisters headed after Amy, their laughter ringing in the cold, clear December air.

"I think it so sweet of Marmee to give us money for new hair ribbons," sixteen-year-old Meg said. "At least I shall feel that I have something new to wear to the party. I'm planning on buying burgundy satin

to go with my taffeta gown. What are you planning to choose, Jo?"

"Haven't thought about it," was the brusque reply, for Jo considered the function of clothes to be practical, not pretty and fashionable. "I'm not going to waste my portion on ribbons. A nice chenille net in a good strong burgundy color will suit me, and keep my hair tidy and bundled out of my way. And you, my Bethy?"

Jo turned to her thirteen-year-old sister, Beth, and her expression softened. Beth was two years younger than Jo, and was her sister's special pet, even though she was her opposite in temperament.

"I suppose I'll choose a pretty blue ribbon to match my gown," Beth said. "But I wish I didn't have to go to the party at all. All those people I shall have to greet and to speak with—I'm sure I'll say something foolish, or drop a punch glass."

"No, you won't at all, dearie," Jo said cheerfully. "You'll be modest and sweet, as you always are. Everyone will be charmed. Besides, the house won't be full of strangers, but friends and neighbors. Though I suppose you'd rather reduce our beautiful cakes to crumbs to feed to the birds on your windowsill," Jo teased.

Beth laughed. "Yes, I do believe I would," she an-

swered, in the same spirit. "And my kittens might like the eggnog. But I'd save one gingersnap for my Jo."

Jo laughed, her fancy tickled by the thought of their fine party food as feed for the cats and birds of the neighborhood.

"Marmee thinks that a caroling party is the perfect way to return all the kindnesses we've received over the past year," Meg said. "Don't you want to give friends a treat and make them feel appreciated?"

"Oh yes, Meg! It is ungrateful of me to complain," Beth said with a sigh.

"Bless your heart, I didn't mean it that way," Meg said, slipping her arm through her sister's. "You're not ungrateful, Beth, just shy. But think of how merry it shall be to have the house full of laughter and good cheer. It shall be like the old days." Meg ended wistfully, for she recalled the days when the March family fortune was still substantial enough to host their neighbors in Concord without worrying about the cost.

"I think it's more fun to give a party and use all our clever March tricks to dress the place up without it costing much," Jo said. "We'll fill the rooms with evergreen branches and vines, make a good punch, and bake like mad the week before. I'm sure folks shall have a better time in our sweet, simple home

than sitting on a slippery upholstered chair, crooking their fingers over their porcelain teacups and nibbling on a tiny French pastry."

Jo mimicked a finicky person trying to nibble while keeping one pinky bent in an elegant fashion, and her three sisters burst out laughing.

But Meg quieted a moment later. "I just wish Father could be there," she said sadly.

All the girls nodded. Mr. March had volunteered to act as chaplain to soldiers fighting the war. Stationed in Washington, D.C., he was far from Concord, Massachusetts. His family was proud of his sacrifice, but they missed him dreadfully.

"Well, I will write to Father all about it, for Marmee told me that I can help her decide on the decorations," Amy said with an important air. Eleven-year-old Amy was the artistic one in the family, and she loved to dream up elegant schemes to dress up their home. "I was hoping that Laurie could bring only white flowers from his conservatory, and I could mix them with green vines and silver ribbons for the centerpieces. But Marmee says that the flowers are a gift, and it wouldn't be polite to tell Laurie what he should choose."

"Very right," Jo approved. "It doesn't seem proper to direct a kindness. And knowing Teddy, if he didn't

have enough white flowers, he'd tramp about for miles and miles to find them, just to please you."

"Would he, really?" Amy asked with a sigh, for she had a romantic nature. "That's so heroic of him!"

"Don't be such a goose," Jo said good-naturedly. "He's not a hero, just a generous boy. Though sometimes an ill-tempered boy if he has to wait for his tea."

Laurie was their neighbor, Theodore Laurence, who lived with his grandfather in the stately mansion next door. Closest to Jo in age, he was her special chum, and she was the only one to call him "Teddy."

"Still, I'm sure there will be *some* white flowers, and if I buy a bit of silver ribbon—or perhaps red will do—I shall make a lovely display," Amy continued. "If only we could get a basket of oranges! I would pile them up in a great *pir-a-mide*, like an Egyptian *spinck*!"

"That's *pyramid*," Jo said, laughing at Amy's pronunciation. "And the *sphinx* is quite a different shape, you know."

Amy waved her mittened hand, not concerned with details. "And then I'd weave the silver ribbon through them and place a few green leaves around the base. And oh, if only I had a pineapple!"

Beth smiled with the other girls at Amy's fanciful ideas, but she felt a bit left out. She wasn't as

excited at the thought of the party as the other girls. It was fun to plan and to bake delicious cakes and decide what the perfect punch recipe might be. But when Beth thought of the actual event, with her dear house filled with noisy strangers, she shrank back from the prospect.

Not strangers, Beth corrected herself, for Jo was right: These guests were friends and neighbors, people she nodded or smiled at and exchanged a few words with on her way to do the shopping in town, or after church. But it was quite different to have to be gracious and carry on a conversation in front of so many people at once! And if the test of her manners was not difficult enough, she'd have to be sociable while wearing her best dress, and trying not to spill!

Why did people have to invite other people to their homes in the first place? Beth wondered. Wouldn't it be much jollier and easier on the nerves to fill one's house with the neighborhood puppies and kittens and dogs and cats? Jo's idea of spreading crumbs on a windowsill for the birds sounded like a capital idea to Beth.

And if the party began to drag a bit, one wouldn't have to strain to come up with something amusing to say. Instead, one could gather all the

animals together for a long ramble in the woods. Now that was Beth's idea of a party!

"Now, what should we do about the Kenniwigs?" Meg asked, breaking into Beth's thoughts. "They should be invited, of course, but the question is, in what fashion?"

Beth let out a soft sigh. The Kenniwig family had recently moved to Concord, and lived in a big, white, rambling corner house at the end of their street. There were seven children in the family, and Beth could not keep them straight. They ranged in age from four to eighteen, and they were all tall and red haired, and had a habit of boisterously calling out impossible questions like, "Have you ever seen such a morning?" or, "You must agree that this is simply the most glorious rain!" and then dashing off before one had a chance to formulate an answer. Beth liked them from a distance, but up close, they made her anxious. Their hearty manner brought out all her shyness and awkwardness.

"I say we knock on their door and ask them to reserve the Friday evening a fortnight away. And we must remind them to be in fine voice, for we shall go caroling," Jo declared. "I'm dying to get to know them better. They're such a jolly set! This will give

us an opportunity to have a good chat so we shan't be all stiff and formal at the party."

"But even though we've been introduced, we haven't called on them, nor they us," Meg fretted, for she was very concerned with matters of form. "I think a written invitation is best."

"Must we muck everything up with such a fuss?" Jo asked, kicking her way through a scattering of leaves. "They seem like such a harum-scarum tribe. Any gesture will do."

Meg lifted her chin primly. "Jo, don't say 'muck,' it's such a disagreeable word. I suppose if you had your way, you'd just halloo your invitations at our neighbors through the hedges."

"That's true," Jo agreed cheerfully. "I'd dispense with fancy engraved cards and invitations altogether. Even kings and queens would have to halloo through hedges!"

"Now, here we are at the store, so let's all settle down and be good," Meg ordered, as Jenkins Dry Goods came into view.

The sisters entered the store and immediately became absorbed with choosing ribbons and net for their hair. While Amy and Meg looked at all the colors and widths and Jo grew predictably impatient,

Beth put her length of simple blue satin ribbon aside and wandered off down another aisle.

Near the rear of the store, Mrs. Jenkins beckoned to her. Beth smiled and started toward her. Sometimes Mrs. Jenkins kindly saved end pieces of material for her.

"I saved a scrap of pretty blue print for you, Beth," Mrs. Jenkins said in a whisper as Beth came close. "And this little piece of pink satin, hardly enough for anything much, I fear."

Beth picked up the small scrap of satin with a soft cry of delight. One of her small pleasures was maintaining the wardrobes of the dolls Jo called "invalids." They were the cast-off dolls of her sisters, and often they were missing eyes and arms, or had torn clothing. Beth loved to stitch away and repair the poor things, for she remembered the days when they were loved and constant companions, and couldn't bear to throw them away.

"It's lovely, Mrs. Jenkins," Beth said warmly. "And there's plenty for me to work with, too. It will make a fine cap for my doll Joanna. Thank you for thinking of me."

"Be sure and stop in next week, for Mrs. Gardiner will be coming in to buy that length of gold damask," Mrs. Jenkins told her. "There's sure to be

a piece or two left over for you. She always changes her mind three times about how much or little she wants, and then has me trim a piece to hold up against the ribbons and laces and such."

"You're very kind," Beth said, beaming at stout Mrs. Jenkins.

But just then, through the window, Beth saw the whole "harum-scarum tribe" of Kenniwigs crossing the street. And they were headed right for the store!

Beth shrank back in sudden shyness. She knew that Jo would engage them in conversation and introduce her sisters. Beth would have to say polite things, and try to keep their names straight, while the older boys bellowed, "Have you ever seen such a rip-roaring dry goods store as Jenkins!"

Beth faded back into a shadowy corner as the noisy Kenniwigs bustled in. Jo immediately greeted them, shaking hands with all, even the four-year-old, Amelia. Meg tried to maintain a gracious, stately air while Jo chatted about cricket with the boys, and Amy shyly showed her new ribbon to Daisy Kenniwig, a girl of about her age.

When the invitation was offered, all the young lads and the girls rushed in with acceptances at once, creating quite a din.

"Well, *isn't* this the jolliest meeting ever," Ruth Kenniwig declared.

"I say, don't you think it the most frightful thing that we haven't called on you?" her sister Kate put in.

"I'm afraid there are so many of us that we tend to rattle about together," Robert said. "Isn't that the rudest thing?"

Jo laughed. "Not at all. It's very difficult to put me out, I'm afraid. Now where did our Beth go?" Jo asked, craning her neck. "You must meet her. Beth?"

"We're keeping the Kenniwigs, Jo," Meg said, holding on to her politeness while she raised her eyebrows at Jo.

"Well, it was jolly to spend a little time with you at last," Jo said, shaking hands all round again. "Be sure and come to our jamboree, now."

"We shall send you an invitation to the party in the mail," Meg finished.

Meg, Jo, and Amy started to the front, as the Kenniwigs headed to the back. Keeping to the far aisle, Beth hurried toward the front of the store, where Jo spied her.

"There she is!" Jo said. "Beth, you missed meeting the Kenniwigs."

"It's too late now," Meg fretted. "We have more

errands to run, and we promised Marmee we wouldn't dawdle."

"Daisy Kenniwig is splendidly pretty," Amy whispered. "I wish I had a beaver bonnet like hers!"

"They seem quite sensible," Jo said. "I like their ways. They're so free and easy that you feel at ease at once."

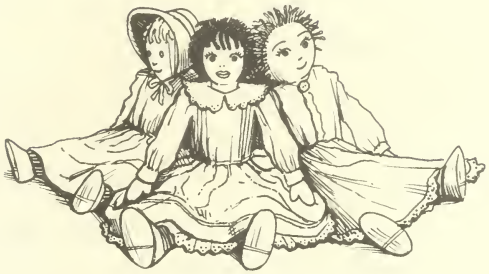
Beth felt the opposite about the Kenniwig family. They spoke in such a forthright manner, and all at the same time! It made her feel like shrinking into a corner. She much preferred to smile at their merriment and bursts of laughter from afar.

Beth was silent as she followed her chattering sisters across the town square. The weather had been changeable lately, with a sudden winter thaw followed by falling temperatures. Today it felt like snow. "'Button-up weather,'" Marmee called it, meaning that you were more liable to catch a chill.

Maybe she would catch a cold! That would be lucky. Then Jo's joke would come true. She would feed her share of the cake and punch to the kittens and the birds. And she would be completely content.

CHAPTER TWO

Beth's Cozy Room



Later that evening, Beth snuggled under her quilt. The promise of snow had been fulfilled. Now it fell in thick flakes outside her window, making her feel snug and warm with her kittens, Castor and Pollux, next to her.

The voices of her sisters floated up the stairs. There was an occasional burst of laughter, but Beth had no desire to join the merriment.

Her sisters and Marmee were planning the party. There was talk of eggnog and punch, and Meg had even suggested that Beth play her violin

for the guests! Beth shuddered. Part of her would have liked to join in the fun, but Beth could not confess to her sisters how the thought of the party plagued her. It was so much easier to lie in her bed, with her head on the pillow and her coverlet so soft around her, and watch the falling snow. Along with the two kittens, she had gathered her dolls around her, making her own cheerful party.

Just the kind I like, Beth thought with a smile as she adjusted Joanna's new pink satin cap.

She had told a small fib after supper, saying that she thought she might be catching cold. Marmee had tucked her in bed, kissed her, and told her to lie quietly. It was just what she wanted.

Beth reached over and picked up her journal and pencil. Sometimes there were things she didn't even want to confess to Jo or Marmee. Of course she always did eventually, but it was so much easier to work out her feelings in her journal first.

I don't believe anybody can get too old for dolls. I never shall. How can one abandon such dear companions? Especially when their stuffing has come out from too much hugging, and their dear little faces are stained with old tears. They are my comfort in the most trying of times.

Here is something I don't understand. Why do people want to crowd their houses with other people, when there is plenty of company and love there already? Sisters, and family, and kittens, and canaries—we have everything we need. I wish we would never have another party. I know it is selfish of me to think so. And Jo says I should conquer my shyness, and I do so want to please my Jo. But I can't help it.

Everyone else looks ahead to when they shall leave. Meg, when she has a home and husband. Jo, when she is a famous writer and shall have adventures. Amy, when she marries someone rich and handsome and travels to Paris and Rome. Why is it that I have no desire to roam?

Beth sighed as she gazed around at her dear, familiar room. She felt comforted by her pretty blue quilt, and her books and violin, and Amy's drawing of the garden propped up on her mantelpiece. Home was where she belonged. Home was where she was content.

And outside her door, all the amusement she desired lay in the woods and fields surrounding her home. She could lie on her back in the sweet-smelling grass and watch the ever-changing sky. She could note the quiet beginnings and wild glories of

the changing seasons, trace the arc of a blue jay's flight, and listen to the gentle murmur of the river.

Someday they shall leave me and go off to the lives they must lead, as Marmee says. And I will be here, with my old, loving dolls and animals around me. But until that sad day, I don't want to go to parties!

Beth sighed and put down her pencil. She reached out to scratch behind Castor's ears. But just then she heard a noise outside.

It sounded like the stamping of hooves, which was very odd. Her room was at the back of the house, overlooking the garden. The Laurence stables were nowhere near enough for her to hear the horses.

Then she heard a soft whinny. Beth threw back her coverlet and ran to the window. She peeked through the curtains and gasped in surprise.

A pure white pony stood in the middle of the garden. A cloud of steam came from his nostrils as he whinnied again. He tossed his mane and kicked up his hooves in the snow, as if he were playing. Then he dropped his nose into the snow and threw a cloud of it into the air. He ran a few steps away as it showered down again. Beth laughed at the sight.

The moon had risen high in the sky. Its pale silver rays gleamed on the horse's coat and turned the freshly fallen snow into sparkling crystals. The horse suddenly stopped and stood as still as a statue, as if he knew he was being admired from afar.

Beth breathed in awe against the windowpane, and it clouded with her breath. Quickly she wiped at the pane with the sleeve of her nightgown. She pressed against the window again.

The horse was looking up at her! He stood, proud and still, the muscles in his powerful neck standing out. Was it a trick of the moonlight, or were his enormous velvety eyes staring straight into hers?

Beth held the horse's gaze, holding her breath so that she wouldn't fog the window again. Time seemed to hang suspended. Around her swirled snow and crystals and moonlight, and the gaze of one pale horse.

But suddenly the horse tensed. His ears pricked, and just a second later Beth heard it, too: the sound of men. She saw the coachman and the stable boys from the Laurence estate run into the garden. One of them was carrying a rope.

They slowed when they saw the pony, and began to circle him. Beth couldn't hear it, but she

knew the coachman, Boggs, was speaking. He held his hands out in a gesture to calm the horse.

But it didn't have an effect. Suddenly the horse reared and plunged. His high, frightened whinny sent a pang to Beth's heart.

She had to help him! Beth pushed away from the window. Quickly donning her slippers and robe, she dashed for the stairs.

CHAPTER THREE

Snow Dancer

By the time Beth reached the porch, Jo and Laurie were both in the garden, trying to help the men.

"You'd better stay back, Beth," Laurie warned. "It could be dangerous. The horse is very skittish."

Beth had never ignored Laurie in her life. But she barely heard his warning. Her eyes were trained on the horse. He stilled as she came into his vision. She walked slowly toward him.

"Beth—" Jo called in a hushed voice.

Beth stopped. She kept her eyes on the horse and held out her hand. The nervous creature made

one delicate step toward her. Then another. Beth clicked her tongue softly.

"You're going to be fine," she murmured. "Just fine, dear. You're scared, aren't you? Poor thing. I'll take care of you. I'll make sure you're all right."

The horse bent his head. His soft lips brushed her palm. Beth rubbed her cheek against his nose.

"You see?" Beth said in the same soothing tone. "I wouldn't hurt you for the world. I'm going to lead you to a nice stall, and food, and you can rest." She said the words in such a low murmur that only the horse could hear.

Gently, Beth grasped the horse's bridle. "So come with me, won't you? And don't be afraid."

The horse lowered his head and waited, docile, by her side.

Boggs scratched his head. "Have you ever seen the like?" he said. "Is this the same shy girl who runs away when she sees me coming?"

"Our Beth has a way with animals," Jo said. "But up till now, it's been with little creatures, like kittens and stray dogs. This wild thing frightened me to death," Jo continued, her hand on her heart. "And she didn't turn a hair!"

"Well, what will we do with him, now that we

have him?" Boggs asked. "Any of you boys have any idea who he belongs to?"

"I've never seen him before," one of the stable boys said, and they all nodded in agreement.

"Nor I," Laurie said. "And between us, I'm sure we know all the horses in this neighborhood."

"He has to belong to someone," Boggs said.

"We'll have to put him up in the stables overnight," Laurie said, with a glance at Beth's yearning face.

Boggs grimaced. "Don't know what your new groom would think about that, young master. Ben Nast is careful of your grandfather's horses. They're high-bred, skittish things. Maybe we should take him to the livery stable in town. If we can get him hitched to the back of a wagon, that is. If this horse kicks up a fuss around Mr. Laurence's horses, I don't want to be responsible."

"But he's as gentle as a lamb now," Laurie said.

"Right now, yes. But he's standing so gentle-like because of the young miss," said Boggs. "But some horses aren't fit for saddle or bridle, and he's one. A bad 'un, I'd say. And we don't have an extra stall for him, anyway."

Beth stroked the horse's nose. "Don't listen," she murmured. "You're not bad! You were just scared,

that's all." In a louder tone, she said, "What if I lead him over, and help settle him down? And I'll come over first thing to see him."

"Can't we put the new foal in with Princie?" Laurie suggested. "That will free up a stall. I'll take responsibility for it with grandfather and Ben Nast."

"Well, now, I guess we could," Boggs answered doubtfully. "Just for one night."

"All right then! That's capital," Laurie said. "Tomorrow we shall decide what to do. That's soon enough. Now, My Lady of the Reins," Laurie said, his black eyes dancing, "will you lead your steed to his chamber?"

Beth smiled. She tugged on the horse's bridle, and he followed her obediently. She led the way across the garden, down the lane, and up the drive to the back of the Laurence mansion.

He shied when he saw the stable building, and Beth had to speak very quietly in his ear and pet his nose until he would consent to being led inside. Then she led him into the stall and filled his trough with water.

"Look, here's some sweet hay for you," Beth told him. "And tomorrow, I'll bring you apples for breakfast."

"I wonder what his name is," Laurie said, leaning over the gate.

"He's white as milk," Jo said. "Perhaps his name is 'Milkweed,' or 'Alabaster,' or 'Moonshine'—"

Laurie laughed. "Those are fanciful names for such a sturdy creature. He's a workhorse, Jo. Look at how sturdy and small he is. He's fit for a plow—a good, steady worker. His name is something like 'Tom' or 'Bill,' more likely."

"His name is Snow Dancer," Beth said. She rubbed her hand along the horse's nose. She said the name with such assurance that Jo and Laurie exchanged a surprised glance.

"I first saw him playing in the snow, underneath the moon," Beth said softly.

"I couldn't think of a better name, myself," Jo declared. "Well done, Bethy."

"Snow Dancer it is then, even if just for a night," Laurie said.

Beth frowned, and Laurie went on more gently, "Beth, dear, the owner will turn up. It's a good horse. The owner wouldn't want to lose it."

"I'm afraid that's true," Jo said. "We can give him shelter and food, but we can't keep him, Beth. He has a home."

Beth turned to them. "You don't understand," she said. "I don't think he has a home. I think he was looking for one. That's why he ended up in our

garden, Jo. He had found the place where he'd be taken care of and loved." She leaned against the horse's flank and petted him gently. He whinnied softly.

"Snow Dancer was sent to me," Beth said simply.

The next morning, Beth was up before breakfast. She slipped into her coat and bonnet and hurried down the lane. She would have liked to say good morning to Snow Dancer, but she couldn't waste a moment. Soon the Laurence household would be up and about, making decisions, and it would be too late.

Beth headed for the outskirts of town. She had thought it over carefully the night before, and she had come up with the best solution for Snow Dancer. Even though Laurie and Jo felt certain that the horse's owner would show up, Beth felt in her heart that even if it did happen, Snow Dancer wouldn't want to return. There was a reason the horse had run away.

"I just need a little time," Beth mused aloud as she tramped down the snowy road on the outskirts of Concord. "I need to find Snow Dancer a good home."

Beth turned down a smaller lane that wound

through the outlying fields. The lane curved around a small pond, and then she saw the Tarbell farm. The white farmhouse with the long front porch looked snug and cozy as a lazy trail of smoke came from the chimney. The sun was barely up. Mr. Tarbell and his young son, Ned, were most likely in the barn, doing the milking. Mrs. Tarbell was probably doing the breakfast dishes. Beth hated to disturb their morning chores, but she had no choice.

Beth had met the Tarbells last year. Marmee's church group had discovered that the young couple's baby was ailing, Ned was sick, and they had run out of money to pay the doctor. Marmee had convinced them that the help she offered was not charity. The Tarbells could pay back the church fund after the harvest. In the meantime, there was a baby to care for and planting to do.

In those first weeks, Beth had often walked out to the farm with Marmee, and she continued to visit when the baby was a little better and Marmee could not come. She sat for many hours in the Tarbell kitchen, holding the baby while Mrs. Tarbell did her chores. After the baby grew well and strong, Beth still came for an occasional visit, bringing a jar of Hannah's preserves or strawberries from the Laurence garden.

Beth walked briskly down the lane and around the side of the house to the kitchen door, where she knew Mrs. Tarbell would be. The woman spotted her through the window and hurried to the door.

"Beth!" she cried. "You're a sight for sore eyes, you are. Come in. I was just feeding the baby."

Beth saw in a glance that Mrs. Tarbell was feeding the baby, heating water for the dishes, and slicing turnips—all at the same time. She bent down to give the baby a kiss, then took off her cloak and bonnet.

She picked up the knife and pointed to the turnips. "Why don't I slice these while we talk? I like to keep my hands busy."

"Bless you, that would be a help," Mrs. Tarbell said. "Can I get you some coffee, or tea? Oh, dear, I'm afraid there's no tea. Coffee?" Mrs. Tarbell picked up the pot. A slight hesitation told Beth that there wasn't much in it.

Beth shook her head. "I've had my tea," she fibbed. "But thank you kindly."

"I'm making a stew, but the baby has been fussing this morning, and I'm behind," Mrs. Tarbell admitted, sitting back down. "And Amos will be in any minute for his cup of coffee. Ned goes straight off

to school. But I like Amos to get warmed up before he heads to his other chores."

Beth began to slice the turnips. She asked about the family's health, and the other news of the farm. She was anxious to state her business, but it wouldn't be polite to launch into her problem before finding out how the Tarbells were faring. And besides, she hadn't seen the Tarbells in a month, and was truly interested to hear all the news.

Mrs. Tarbell put the last spoon of applesauce into the baby's mouth. "Here I am, running on, and not asking about how you are, Beth. And your family?"

"Everyone is well, thank you," Beth said. "But I'm afraid I've come to ask a favor of you and Mr. Tarbell."

Mrs. Tarbell gave a small toy to the baby and turned back to check the coffeepot. "What is it, Beth? You know we'd grant you anything in our power."

Just then, the door opened, and Mr. Tarbell entered, stamping his feet. "Beth!" His face creased in a smile. "Your rosy face is a pleasant sight on this cold morning."

"Beth has come to ask us a favor, Amos," Mrs. Tarbell said, handing him a steaming cup.

He sat at the kitchen table. While he offered a thick finger for the baby to play with, he turned to Beth with a smile. "And what would that be, mind?"

Beth explained how Snow Dancer had blundered into the March garden, and how there was no place to put him.

"I suppose his owner will step forth and claim him," she said. "But until then, he needs shelter. Do you think you could keep him in your barn? I'd pay for his feed," she said quickly, "and come out every day to take care of him."

"Of course you can stable him here," Mr. Tarbell said. "I sold Tarpatch last month, so we have plenty of room."

"You sold Tarpatch?" Beth asked. "But how do you get to town? And what about the plowing come spring?" She instantly regretted the remark, for Mr. and Mrs. Tarbell exchanged a worried glance.

"Well, we had a mortgage to pay, and we're relying on our good neighbors at the moment," Mr. Tarbell answered. "Why, the planting is months away. So bring your horse along, little Beth, and we'll keep him snug for you."

Mr. Tarbell put down his coffee cup. "Now, I'd better be getting to my chores."

"And I should be getting home," Beth said, for

she didn't want to cause too much of an interruption. Spending time at the Tarbells had given her insight into how hard farmers worked. "I'll be out later on today with Snow Dancer."

"Now, that's a pretty name for a horse," Mrs. Tarbell said approvingly.

Beth bid good-bye to the Tarbells and hurried back down the lane. She felt as though a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Snow Dancer couldn't have a better place to stay than at the Tarbells'. And it would give her time to decide what to do next.

But Beth's steps slowed as she remembered the almost-empty coffeepot and Mr. and Mrs. Tarbell's worried looks when he'd brought up the mortgage.

They had been so generous! They had offered her a place for Snow Dancer for free. Even though she had offered to pay for feed, shouldn't she have offered money for board? The extra money would certainly be welcome.

Beth frowned as she trudged along. She wasn't sure yet how to pay for the feed. How much did a horse eat, anyway? She'd like to offer the Tarbells a fair sum to house Snow Dancer.

But where could she find the money?

CHAPTER FOUR

Pitching In

"There she is!" Jo rushed into the hallway at the sound of the door. Following closely on her heels were Amy and Meg. "Where have you been, Beth? We were worried. I thought you were visiting Snow Dancer, but when I went to the stables to fetch you for breakfast, I couldn't find you."

"Enough questions, Jo. Poor Beth looks frozen," Meg said. "Come into the dining room, we're just having breakfast. Some hot oatmeal will do you good."

Beth allowed herself to be pulled along by her

sisters. Marmee had already poured a cup of hot tea for her, and she took it gratefully.

"I wasn't at the Laurences'," Beth explained, sipping her tea. "I was at the Tarbells'."

"The baby isn't doing poorly again, is she?" Marmee asked, concerned.

"No, they are all well," Beth said. "But I asked them to take Snow Dancer in. I said I'd pay for his feed. But on the way home it occurred to me that I should offer something for his board, as well. I'm afraid I haven't come up with a way to do that as of yet. I have been saving my pennies since the summer for Christmas, you see," Beth went on, looking at her sisters and Marmee anxiously. "I haven't said anything, because I wanted it to be a surprise on Christmas morning, when I'd give you all presents. But if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to give it to the Tarbells for Snow Dancer instead."

"Of course we wouldn't mind, if it's important to you, Beth," Jo said.

"But how do you know that the owner won't turn up today?" Meg pointed out.

"The horse does belong to someone, Beth," Marmee said. "You can't hide him at the Tarbells'."

"I don't mean to hide him," Beth said. "I mean to keep him warm and well fed. We can post notices

up in town for the owner to contact us." She put down her teacup. "I know you don't understand," she said softly, staring at her plate. "And maybe I don't, very clearly. But Snow Dancer spoke to me last night."

"He *spoke?*" Amy asked, but Jo poked her.

"Go on, Bethy," Jo said gently.

"He looked at me, and it was as *though* he spoke," Beth said, struggling to explain. "He must have been unhappy and mistreated, or why would he have run away? He was sent to me, you see. We belong together. I promised him I would take care of him, and I mean to do it."

For a moment, the family seemed taken aback at Beth's quiet determination.

"Well, that's settled," Jo finally said, breaking the silence. "Now, what can we do to help?"

Marmee warned Beth of the hazards of growing too attached to Snow Dancer, but she did give her reluctant blessing to the "Snow Dancer Upkeep and Maintenance Fund."

"Beth, my pet, someone will turn up to claim this horse," Marmee told her. "Be it later rather than sooner, it will still occur. As long as you know this, and are prepared to let him go back to his owner,

I see nothing wrong with raising the money to shelter him, if you can."

For the first time in her life, Beth was the one to call a special meeting of the sisters in the garret. The girls huddled on the three-legged sofa and talked over schemes.

"It's no good having a bake sale, for it's nearly Christmas, and everyone's larders are full, I daresay," Meg said with a sigh. "The best we can do is work a little harder to bring in a few pennies. I shall take in some extra sewing."

"And I'll talk to my chums at school," Amy said. "Once they hear the story, perhaps they'll donate apples and carrots for Snow Dancer."

"Thank you, dearest," Beth said, giving little Amy a hug.

"And I shall write a story, with you as the heroine, Beth," Jo declared. "I'll make Snow Dancer a magical horse who has escaped from an evil magician. Or perhaps a circus," Jo mused. "Then I'll send it round, and see if I can make some money on it."

"Thank you, Jo," Beth told her gratefully.

"And I'll help you exercise him, as well," Jo said. "After all, I *have* learned to be a prize horsewoman on Ellen Tree."

The four sisters burst out laughing. "Ellen Tree"

was not a horse, but a branch on the old apple tree. Amy and Jo had contrived a way of practicing their horsemanship by throwing the old sidesaddle over the sturdy branch, fixing the reins in front, and riding away.

"Good old Ellen Tree," Jo finished, still laughing. "Thanks to her, I've ridden hundreds of delightful miles without having to leave my backyard!"

"And do you have any more ideas, Beth?" Amy asked her.

"I am still thinking," Beth said. She didn't want to tell her sisters what she was planning. They would only try to talk her out of it.

But Beth had no talents to sell, to her mind. She couldn't sew as fast and prettily as Meg, nor contrive stories like Jo. And she did not have friends eager to help, the way Amy did. The only thing she could think of to do was to sell something of hers.

But she had only one thing of any value. And it was the thing she treasured the most.

"I'm sorry, Miss March," Mr. Feidler of the Concord Music Shop said. "I would like to help you. It was a very fine instrument in its time. But it's not worth much now, and what it *is* worth, I cannot

afford to pay." He handed her back the violin. "I wish that I could help you."

Beth nodded. Her throat felt tight. "Thank you," she said.

He looked at her, his bright blue eyes kind. "I did not spoil your Christmas, did I? You wanted to buy presents with the money, perhaps?"

Beth swallowed hard against her tears. She would not want Mr. Feidler to feel badly. He was a kind gentleman who often set aside sheets of music that he thought she would like.

"You haven't spoiled my Christmas in the least, Mr. Feidler," she replied. "I am rich in all the things that matter. My family is well and happy, so how can this Christmas be anything but a happy one?"

"What a true thing you said!" Mr. Feidler said, clasping his hands. "I shall tell my little girl, Anna, and it will be a good lesson for her to learn."

Beth smiled shyly, and walked out into the snowy street. She couldn't help feeling discouraged as she walked home. She climbed the stairs to her room wearily and put her violin back in the corner.

Beth looked around her room with a sigh. As much as she loved her things, she knew they were not valuable to anyone but herself. She had nothing more to sell, and she couldn't think of any skill she

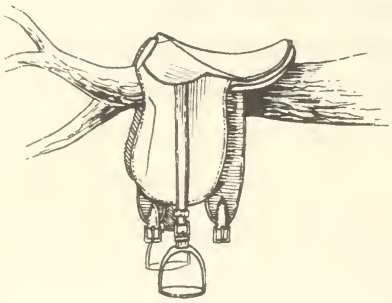
possessed that would earn her money. Compared to Jo, Meg, and Amy, she was not helping very much. And it was her project!

Beth brought her dolls over to the armchair by the window and sat down among them for comfort. She drew her saddest, oldest doll into her lap.

"Oh, Joanna," she cried, holding her favorite doll close. "Help me to think of something! I can't depend wholly on my sisters. I must think of a way to raise funds!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Busy Days



"Come on Beth, don't be shy, now," Jo said in a wheedling tone. "Just hop on the saddle, there's a brave girl. Remember, you always mount from the left."

"I'm not scared, Jo," Beth said. She took a step on the box they were using as a mounting block. Then she swung herself into the sidesaddle.

"Do you have a good hold on the reins?" Jo asked.

Beth grinned at her sister. "Giddyap, Ellen Tree," she said, and bounced a little in the saddle.

Though Beth and Jo had ventured out to visit Snow Dancer at the Tarbells' several times, they had yet to ride him. Neither of them had riding habits, and it would be too difficult to mount the horse in their long dresses. Until they could, Jo thought it best for Beth to practice on the tree branch. At least she could get used to mounting and dismounting.

Jo kept trying to soothe her nerves about the prospect of riding Beth's Snow Dancer. She seemed to be enjoying her status as teacher, so Beth didn't have the heart to tell her that she herself wasn't a bit flurried at the prospect of riding. She knew that Snow Dancer would be gentle and easy.

Jo strode about the yard, flicking a tree branch like a crop. She paused to inspect Beth's posture with narrowed eyes.

"I do think you're ready," she pronounced.

Beth hid her smile by bending over and fussing with the reins. "Thank you, Jo."

"We'll go out this afternoon," Jo decided. "Do you think our riding habits will be ready?"

"Meg promised they would," Beth told her. Marmee's riding habit from her girlhood needed to be altered for Beth, and Jo had no riding outfit at all. Meg had offered to alter an old skirt and dream up something special for Jo, promising that it would

be "sensible and neat, and not have one ribbon or ruffle on it."

"Let's go in and see if we can take a peek," Jo suggested. "Meg is being so secretive!"

"Let me dismount, and we'll go," Beth said cheerfully. She swung off Ellen Tree, and they hurried toward the house.

It had been three days, and there had been no sign of Snow Dancer's owner. Notices had been posted in town, and the owner of the livery stable had been told about the horse. Every day that went by served to assure Beth that Snow Dancer had found the place where he belonged.

Beth made the first payment to the Tarbells, using her meager savings. Where the next payment would come from, she didn't know. Jo was only halfway through her story, and Meg had not been able to find anyone who needed extra sewing done.

"We're so close to Christmas that no one has money to spare," Meg explained to Beth. "But I'll find something—I promise."

Beth and Jo hurried into the house. Meg sat in the parlor, knitting. She looked up at them, her eyes dancing with mischief.

"There you are! It's about time you came to see your new habits."

"You know very well we were trying hard not to plague you," Jo cried. "Are they truly finished?"

Meg nodded. "Come upstairs," she ordered, her eyes twinkling in that merry way that told Beth that her sister had planned a surprise. Meg led the way to her room. Laid out on the bed were two riding habits. Beth ran to the dark blue trimmed with black braid. It was simple and elegant, and when she held it up she was sure that it would fit perfectly. But as she held it in the air, she noticed something odd.

She turned to Meg, but she stopped when she saw Jo's face. Her sister's mouth was open in comical surprise, and she appeared to be at an uncharacteristic loss for words.

"T—t—trousers!" Jo sputtered. "You made *trousers* for our riding habits? Bless you, Meg, I thought you'd be far too proper for such a sensible design!"

"I thought you'd be pleased," Meg said, laughing at Jo's pleasure and surprise. "And may I say, you'll still look proper—see the panel in the front? It will give you the illusion of wearing a skirt, while you have the freedom of riding astride."

"What joy!" Jo exclaimed, holding the trousers against her skirt.

"Besides, Mr. Tarbell doesn't have a sidesaddle, and ours is far too worn to be safely used," Meg

said. "Trousers for you and Beth are a practical solution." She frowned. "You'll be the talk of Concord, I daresay, but I'm sure you won't care in the least."

Jo picked up the habit and hugged it to her. "I never dreamed I would be made so happy by a piece of clothing!" she exclaimed. "Now I can ride like a sensible fellow, and hang Concord if it disapproves!"

"Well, you'll be all the way out at the Tarbell farm, so I don't think anyone will see you," Meg said with a sigh, as though she were already regretting what she'd done.

"Come on, Jo," Beth said, excitement coursing through her. "Let's go see Snow Dancer!"

The sweet smell of hay hit Beth's nostrils as she and Jo stepped into the barn. Snow Dancer stood in his stall. His ears pricked forward, but he didn't turn his head as Beth and Jo drew closer.

"You see?" Beth said in a soft murmur. "You're shy, like me."

At the sound of her voice, Snow Dancer turned and gently bumped his head against the gate of his stall. Beth laughed softly.

"Yes, I've come to take you out to get fresh air," she told him. She approached the stall and held out her hand. Snow Dancer pushed his muzzle forward

and she rubbed it. It felt like velvet to the touch. Beth laid her cheek against it.

"All right now," she said. "Are you ready to take a ride? It's a beautiful day."

Snow Dancer stepped back a few paces so that she could unhook the gate.

"It's as if he understands you, Beth," Jo said in a hushed voice.

"Of course he does," Beth answered, slipping inside the stall.

"Here I come," Mr. Tarbell called, entering the barn. "Let me saddle him up for you, Beth. As long as you keep him gentle, I won't have to worry about a kick to the head."

"You wouldn't kick kind Mr. Tarbell, would you, Snow?" Beth asked, scratching him near the ears as Mr. Tarbell inched into the stall warily. She kept him quiet and calm as Mr. Tarbell threw the saddle over his back.

Mr. Tarbell tightened the girth, then slipped on the bridle. He backed out again. "You lead him, Beth," he said. "I think that's best. He'll take hay and water from me, but he's awful skittish, just the same."

Beth led Snow Dancer out into the crisp afternoon air. "Snow" tossed his mane as they walked out into the yard. Beth led him to the mounting block.

"Yes, it's a beautiful day, isn't it?" Beth said to Snow Dancer. "We have a nice long meadow to ride through, and perhaps a bit of woods."

"Let me take the reins, Beth," Jo said. "We already decided that I should ride him first, just in case. We haven't seen anyone on his back yet, and if he throws me, I'll be more likely to bounce up right up again, with my hard head."

Nervously, Beth handed the reins to Jo. Immediately, Snow Dancer shied away a few feet.

"There, there," Beth murmured, patting his flank. "This is Jo. She won't hurt you."

Mr. Tarbell had waited outside the doors of the barn. "I'm not sure about this, girls," he said. "Maybe Beth should ride him first."

"I can do it," Jo said determinedly. "I used to ride, when I was younger, and Beth never did. I'm afraid she won't be able to handle him." She tried to put her foot in the stirrup, but Snow Dancer, living up to his name, danced a few feet away from her.

Mr. Tarbell laughed. "I think she can handle him a good deal better than anyone else, if you don't mind my saying, Miss Jo."

Jo eyed the horse. Snow Dancer rolled his soft brown eyes, and let loose a snort.

"I think you're right, Mr. Tarbell," she said ruefully. She handed the reins to Beth. "Here you are, then. But do be careful!"

Beth took the reins. She placed a foot in the stirrup. Snow Dancer stood perfectly still as she mounted. Beth swung her leg over and sat, feeling the horse's power beneath her. Snow Dancer didn't move a muscle, as if letting her get used to the feel of him.

"Now, hold the reins lightly, and keep your heels down, and let him know you're his master," Jo warned.

Beth smiled. She knew she wasn't Snow's master. They were a team. She felt him underneath her, powerful and expectant. She nudged him just a tiny bit with her heels, and he walked forward.

"That's it, Bethy," Jo breathed.

Beth leaned forward to pat Snow Dancer. "Nothing to it," she told her amazed sister. "Nothing to it at all."

Amy was true to her word, bringing home sacks of apples and carrots from the girls at school. Laurie suddenly discovered that the new groom had somehow ordered way too much feed for the Laurence stable, and donated it to the Tarbells. Beth had a

suspicion that the "mistake" had been nothing of the kind, and the Laurences were trying to be helpful. She was grateful for everyone's support.

Everything had worked out, and Beth pushed away the worry of how she would continue to find the money for Snow Dancer's care. She was too thrilled with the fact that she could be with him every day.

Every afternoon, Jo and Beth headed out to exercise Snow Dancer. After numerous tries, many whispers, and presents of apples, Beth was able to coax the horse to take Jo on his back. The two girls took turns riding Snow Dancer through the Tarbell meadow and the surrounding woods.

Beth started out riding at a slow walk, just enjoying the scent of the meadow and the way Snow's head bobbed in rhythm with his step. But gradually she grew bolder. With just a tiny nudge of her heels, Snow Dancer's pace would quicken. She knew from the way he tossed his head that he wanted to go faster. Finally, she let him have his head, and he quickened his pace to an easy lope. Beth's hat flew off her head, and she laughed aloud as the trees streaked by.

When she galloped back to the yard and drew

Snow Dancer to a halt just inches from Jo, her sister gaped at her in astonishment.

"Excuse me," Jo said with a grin. "Did you happen to see my sister while you were out riding, ma'am? She's such a shy, timid thing."

Beth's laugh was long and merry. She slid off Snow Dancer's back and tossed the reins to Jo. "I'll let you know if I see her," she said.

That evening, Beth came into the parlor and found it empty. She sat in her corner by the fire. Usually, at this time, the family gathered to compare news of their day.

But Marmee had gone to the church, hoping that baby clothes had been donated so that Beth could take them to the Tarbells the next day. Amy was upstairs, finishing the painting of the Tarbell farm she had decided would be a Christmas gift from the March family. Jo was in the garret, writing her story, and Meg was catching up on her own sewing upstairs, after spending every spare minute making the new riding habits.

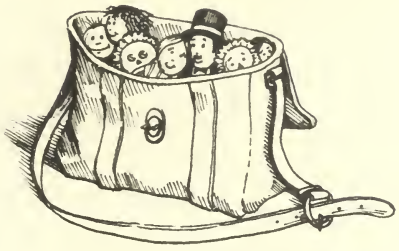
Suddenly Beth realized that it was the fourth evening that week that she'd sat alone. Why hadn't she noticed how long it had been since the family had gathered?

Snow Dancer had changed the habits of the household. Suddenly, there was less time for dreaming in front of the fire, or reading aloud, or relating the details of their days.

Beth felt a pang and dropped her sewing in her lap. She was glad to know that the horse was stabled safely nearby. But suddenly her family had disappeared!

CHAPTER SIX

Dolls and Decisions



From that evening on, Beth kept a watchful eye on her sisters. She made a note of whenever she saw them make any sacrifice of sleep or leisure to keep Snow Dancer.

Here I have been happily riding about the countryside, she wrote in her journal. *And I have not given one thought to what sacrifices my family has been making! I never noticed Jo's red-rimmed eyes, or the way Meg's head droops over her sewing, or how*

heavy the bag of apples is that Amy has carried the long way home.

They do it so that I shall be happy. They are so generous and good, and I fear I am trespassing on their kindness. It's not fair of me to turn the household upside-down for my sake alone!

Beth sighed. What was she to do? It looked as though the Snow Dancer Upkeep and Maintenance Fund was taking a toll on her family that she could not accept.

I must shoulder my burden alone somehow, Beth wrote. *I must!*

Beth hugged Joanna to her cheek. The doll was so warm and soft.

And then, almost as if Joanna had whispered the idea in her ear, Beth knew what she had to do.

The next day, Beth dressed her precious dolls in their best outfits. She lined Marmee's battered satchel with an old piece of velvet and carefully packed the dolls inside.

"Be good," she told the dolls. Then she sighed and closed the case.

Beth put on her cape and bonnet and trudged her way to town. Down one of the small side streets

was Mrs. Pauling's Doll Shop. Mrs. Pauling carried the most beautiful and expensive of dolls, but she also carried rag dolls and toys. Beth hoped that she would buy at least a few of the dolls, for they were so beautifully dressed she might overlook the fact that their eyes didn't match, or that underneath their pretty caps and bonnets their hair was missing.

As she turned the corner, she spied the Kenniwig clan, and her steps faltered. She would have to say hello, and try to remember names, and she had wanted to slip away to town and back without seeing anyone.

But Ruth Kenniwig, one of the older sisters of about Meg's age, spotted her. She waved.

"Miss March—Beth, is it? We met your sisters just recently. I say, have you ever seen such a gruesome day! All gray and cold, and the icy rain yesterday has washed away almost all the snow. Don't you long for another snowfall?"

"Oh, indeed," Beth said, trying to smile politely without being obliged to stop.

"Father bought a new sleigh," little Amelia said. "Don't you adore sleighs?"

"Are you going to town?" Robert asked. "We can all walk together, if you like. Let me carry your satchel for you, if I may."

He reached out for it, but Beth hurried her step. "Thank you so much, but I can manage it, and I really can't stop to chat—"

But before Beth could finish her sentence, she found her boots suddenly flying out from underneath her. Her feet went up, and she went down, falling rather hard on a patch of ice. The satchel was wrenched from her fingers and sailed into the air. The worn latch opened, and all her dolls tumbled out and landed on the walk.

Beth felt mortified. If she had to choose any souls in Concord who she would not wish to know what she was carrying, it would have been the Kenniwigs.

Now they would look at her, and stare, and wonder why she was still playing with dolls. And unlike other, more reserved folk, they would press the point. They would ask her a thousand questions, about why the dolls were dressed so nicely, and why they were in a satchel, and what their names were, and whose they were, and where she was going, and why!

Her cheeks felt hot as she hurriedly scrambled over the ice toward her dear porcelain doll Lily. But the Kenniwig clan was already moving, bumping into each other with many an "Oh, dear," and,

"Watch your elbows, Robbie!" and, "I've got this one!"

Amelia picked up Lily and straightened her black velvet cape. "I like this one best. Isn't she pretty, Ruth?"

"Charming," Ruth replied. "But look at this doll, Amelia. Isn't she sweet?"

"I say, this one looks a dashing fellow," Robert said. He held up the doll Undine, who Beth had dressed in trousers in honor of her and Jo's new riding habits.

The Kenniwigs began to place the dolls back in the satchel. Beth noticed how carefully they put each doll inside. They didn't mangle the clothes, or throw the dolls in haphazardly. She would have thought they would have, given their boisterous manner.

"They are simply splendid," Kate Kenniwig told her. "The clothes are so cunning. I wish I could be so clever!"

"It's just a bit of sewing," Beth said.

"Not at all," Ruth said. "Look at the ruffles, and the bows, and the bits of finery! But they aren't grand and elegant. They're jolly and comfortable, and make you smile just to look at them."

"They're much nicer than *my* dolls," Daisy said.

"That's because your dolls are silly, and you bounce them downstairs, and mistreat them," her twin, Freddie, said importantly.

Amelia stood close to the suitcase and stared at it longingly. "Are they all yours?" she asked Beth.

Beth might have felt shy if one of the older sisters had asked the question. But Amelia's blue eyes were round with wonder, and her little freckled face was so eager that Beth broke into a smile.

"Now they are," she explained. "But most of them belonged to my sisters. They were sick, and had all sorts of wounds, until I rescued them. This is Fanny, my sister Meg's doll when she was little. She used to have no eyes at all, until I sewed these pretty green buttons on. And Calantha used to be called Carrie, until my sister decided that she needed a more romantic name. Jo used to make up all kinds of stories for her, so I made sure to dress her in a romantic gown. And I rescued Lily, the doll you like best, from Jo. Jo had decided to use the poor dear as a messenger—she was about to tuck messages to our neighbor Laurie in Lily's apron pocket and throw her from the window across to the Laurences' house!"

Beth took a deep breath. She couldn't imagine how she'd managed to get out such a long explana-

tion without feeling awkward or shy. But the Kenniwigs had hung on her words and looked at each doll as she explained its history. It was easy to talk if people were interested.

"Oh, no!" Amelia cried. "Paddy got to my Violet yesterday and tore off her arm," she confided solemnly.

"Paddy is our terrier, and Violet is Amelia's doll, lest you think our household is full of bloodshed," Ruth told Beth, laughing.

"Violet is poor and sick," Amelia told Beth. "Couldn't you fix her up, too? You could come back to our house, and we could give you a molasses cookie."

"And a nice cup of tea as well," Kate broke in. "Do come, Miss March. Poor Amelia has been heartbroken. Oh, dear, you were on your way somewhere. We wouldn't want to impose—"

"But we'd *adore* having you join us," Ruth broke in. She smiled, and Beth suddenly felt a little more at ease with the Kenniwigs. Why, Jo was right. They were kind!

"I'd be delighted," she told them.

It was easy to walk along, listening to Amelia's chatter. When Amelia put her hand in Beth's it felt perfectly natural. Robert packed the suitcase under

his arm and, whistling, led the way to the Kenniwig house.

Beth felt only a little shy as she entered the grand house. But somehow the house was like the Kenniwigs themselves, a jumble of rugs, vases, sofas, and more chairs than could possibly be needed, giving an air of cheerful disorder.

Beth made a note, for Jo's sake, of the many books piled on tables and even stacked on the floor. There were fine landscapes hanging on the walls that she tried to memorize so that she could describe them to Amy. And she would try very hard to remember for Meg exactly what the porcelain tea service was like, and the pretty fabric of the curtains.

After tea and molasses cookies, Amelia insisted that Beth come up to the nursery. There, dolls lined the shelves, their painted porcelain faces staring at Beth.

"They're lovely," Beth said, slowly walking past them.

"But they are too dear to play with," Amelia said. "Here is my favorite."

She thrust her doll Violet at Beth. Beth smiled as she took it carefully. This was the kind of doll she loved, shabby from long hugs and many kisses.

"Did you save her poor arm?" she asked Amelia gravely.

Amelia ran to a drawer. She held out the arm to Beth. "Can you fix her, Beth?" she pleaded.

"Of course I can," Beth promised. "Then I will sew a new dress for her, with a brand new velvet cape. How about that?"

"Would you?" Amelia asked. "And would you make her a traveling suit? I'm taking her to my cousins' in Boston for Christmas. We're to stay a whole week."

Beth nodded. "Then she'll definitely need a traveling suit, won't she?"

"What about *my* dolls?" Daisy asked. "I don't play with them much anymore, but I was planning to take Winifred with me to Boston."

"Well, I shall have to make a traveling outfit for Winifred as well," Beth said solemnly. "We wouldn't want her to be jealous of Violet."

"Now, Amelia, Daisy," Ruth said gently, "we can't impose on Miss March this way."

Amelia hung her head. "Oh." She looked up, her face full of tragedy. "But Violet needs her!" she cried.

Beth knelt down in front of Amelia. "You aren't imposing in the least. Of course I will care for Violet. Can you spare her for a day or two?" She turned

to Daisy. "And Winifred, as well? I shall bring them home with me."

Amelia ran off to pack Violet's "dressing case," and Daisy took off for her room. Ruth shook her head at Beth.

"Despite what you say, I'm sure we are imposing, Miss March."

"Please call me Beth," Beth answered. "And I truly would be happy to help—"

"Still, we can't let you take on the expense of sewing clothes for Violet and Winifred, any more than we would let you take on the expense of sewing clothes for us," Kate broke in. "I insist on paying for materials, at least."

It was as though a ray of sunshine broke into Beth's mind. Everything was suddenly wonderfully clear. She smiled.

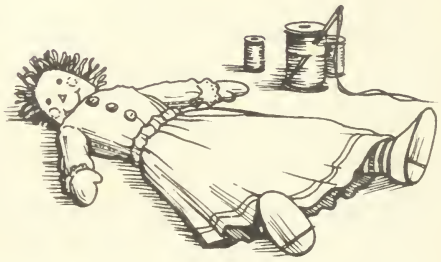
"I'll accept your generous offer, on one condition," she said. "I could not accept money for myself, but a small donation to a certain charity would be welcome."

"Of course," Kate replied. "You need only to name it."

"The Snow Dancer Upkeep and Maintenance Fund," Beth replied promptly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Miss March's Doll Infirmary



To everyone's great surprise, Beth had walked out one morning with the intention of parting with her beloved dolls, and instead had returned with her very own business. Miss March's Doll Infirmary was born.

Before Beth was quite through with restoring Violet to her former glory, Amelia's little friend Georgina arrived, clutching a sad-looking Nancy, who "must have sprucing up for Christmas, please, ma'am?"

And Nancy was followed by Dulcie, who was

followed by Malinda, who was followed by a nameless rag doll held mutely out to Beth by a tearful Susanna Pollard, for one foot of the doll was missing and stuffing was coming out of her head. Susanna was the daughter of the owner of the livery stable, and she had heard of Beth and come calling.

Not only did Beth stitch and sew the doll to make her as good as new, she and Susanna made long lists of names, trying to decide what would suit her. "For," Beth told Susanna, "anyone can see that this doll has character and personality, and deserves the very best of names." While they debated over "Regina" and "Belinda," Beth heard about Susanna's young brother, who had died of diphtheria, and had "gone to the angels." And when the name "Angelina" was chosen, both Beth and Susanna had tears in their eyes.

"If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it," Jo whispered to Meg as Beth saw another little customer and her mother to the door. Before leaving, the girl clinked some coins in the jar Beth used for donations.

Beth had never been so busy. She had her usual chores to do, but in every free moment she had, she busily stitched and sewed, creating wonderful outfits

and restoring old, battered limbs and bright button eyes.

But still, when Beth counted up the coins in her jar, they were not collecting fast enough to suit her. The little owners of her "patients" were as generous as could be, but it did not cost many pennies to stitch up a doll, and it would hurt her conscience to accept more than the service was worth.

Which means I need more customers, Beth wrote in her journal. *Perhaps if I tacked up a sign somewhere in town? I wish I could advertise in the paper, but that would use up my funds.*

Beth sketched a new doll outfit on a blank page and added a pair of lace mittens. She wondered if Mrs. Jenkins had any more cast-off material for her.

And didn't Mrs. Jenkins have three daughters with children? Suddenly Beth smiled.

Well, then. If business won't come to me fast enough, I suppose I must go out to meet it!

At breakfast the next morning, Beth appeared in her best everyday dress, her hair neatly arranged, and without her apron.

"If it weren't you, my Beth, I'd say you were dressed for making calls," Jo said as she buttered her toast.

"I am making calls this morning," Beth said, composedly stirring sugar into her tea.

Jo's knife clattered against her plate. Meg's cup stopped halfway to her lips. Marmee looked up sharply from a letter she was reading, and Amy stared at Beth, her mouth agape.

"You, Beth?" Amy exclaimed. "But you never make calls!"

"Hush, Amy," Jo scolded, but she looked at Beth expectantly.

Beth couldn't help smiling at her family's bewilderment and curiosity. Ducking her head to hide her grin, she spread jam on her toast.

"I just thought I'd visit some of our friends and acquaintances to see if anyone had dolls that needed care," she explained.

"You mean you're going to knock on doors and seek new business?" Jo blurted, despite her effort to keep still.

"I'm not going to visit strangers, but only people I know," Beth said. "Is that all right, Marmee?"

"Of course it is," Marmee said, recovering from her surprise. "I'm sure everyone will be happy to see you, my dear."

"Whom are you going to call on?" Jo asked curiously.

"Well, I suppose I'll start with the tradespeople I know," Beth said, thinking. "For I am a bit nervous, I admit. Mrs. Jenkins has three daughters and quite a few nieces, and Mr. Quince at the fish shop has a four-year-old daughter. Then, once I have gone through town and have my courage up, I'll start with our neighbors. Colonel Drabble has four daughters, and two of them are under the age of ten. I might have some luck there."

Jo's face was red with a suppressed explosion. Beth could read her beloved sister's features plainly. Beth knew Jo was longing to let out a good, thumping "Jumping Jehoshaphat!" or "Merciful Heaven!" or "Bless my sainted boots!" But she knew Jo did not want to hurt her feelings.

"But Beth, you're afraid of Colonel Drabble," Amy pointed out, not having Jo's sensitivity or Meg's delicacy. "He's so cross and disagreeable, and he looks so fierce!" Amy shivered. "I long to know Caroline Drabble, but I never would be able to meet that dragon."

"I'm sure he's disagreeable because of his leg wound from the war," Beth answered. "And it must be difficult, raising four daughters alone. We shouldn't judge him, for I've seen him with his daughters in the park, and he seems kind."

"But won't you be terribly frightened?" Amy asked doggedly, even though Meg raised her eyebrows, and Jo poked her underneath the table.

"Yes, I suppose I shall," Beth said calmly. She took a sip of tea.

But I'm doing it for Snow Dancer, and nothing is too hard, Beth said silently, smiling at the faces she loved. *And I'm doing it for all of you, so that my family won't have to make any more sacrifices than they do already. That makes it easiest of all.*

It was a hard day for Beth. Despite her collected manner at breakfast, and her earnest desire to conquer her bashful nature, she was a bundle of nerves. She had to walk around the town square three times before getting up the nerve to ask if Mrs. Jenkins would ask her daughters and nieces if they had any "invalid" dolls. And she found herself buying a large piece of sole from Mr. Quince in order to postpone by a few minutes the necessity of bringing up his young daughter.

Well, now we'll have some nice fish for supper, at least, Beth thought as she walked home. *And Mrs. Jenkins said she would certainly ask her daughters if there were any dolls in the house that needed mending. Mr. Quince was so kind! He said he felt sure that Dolly could use a new gown*

and cloak as a Christmas surprise. And what good fortune that Mrs. Reed happened to be in the market, and said her six-year-old's rag doll had gotten trampled by a cow!

Beth gave the fish to a grateful Hannah, straightened her bonnet, and set out again. Deciding to get the worst over first, she marched up the Drabble stairs with a determined step. But she faltered as she reached for the knocker. She raised it, but let it fall soundlessly into her palm.

Beth closed her eyes. She thought again of Jo scribbling night after night in the garret, of Amy bringing home apples, of Meg sewing until her eyes gave out. *I must do my part.*

This time, she let the knocker fall.

The door opened almost immediately. Colonel Drabble stood in the doorway, a newspaper in his hand. His eyebrows seemed to bristle at her, and his frown was terrible.

"Eh? What is it then? Speak up! I don't have all day. Is it a missionary tract you're bringing me? Don't want 'em." He flapped the newspaper at her like a dust rag.

"If you please," Beth said, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's Beth March, your neighbor, sir."

He peered down at her. "Well, so it is, so it is.

Good day, Miss March. Didn't recognize you. My eyes aren't the best. What can I do for you?"

The tone was a trifle kinder. But the brows still looked threatening, and the Colonel's impatient manner threw Beth into confusion.

"I—I've come to talk to you, sir," she stammered.

"You have? Well, now. About what topic, Miss?" the Colonel asked. He was trying to be kind, Beth supposed, but his question was barked at her so hastily that she just felt more flustered.

"About dolls," she blurted.

The Colonel stared at her for what felt like an eternity. Then he threw back his head and laughed, his whole body shaking.

Colonel Drabble threw away his newspaper and held out a hand to Beth. "It will certainly be an improvement on my reading," he said, his gray eyes twinkling. "Do come in, Miss March."

A few days later, Beth sat quietly in the parlor, sewing a new red velvet cloak for Gertie Quince's "Dolly." She felt busy and contented, for Miss March's Doll Infirmary was full of patients.

Behind her, she could hear the clink of china as Marmee set the tea table. Any moment, Meg and Amy would come in from the kitchen, bearing the

teapot and sandwiches. Jo was in town buying sugar, for they had begun the baking for the party and had run out. With all her sisters around her, Beth felt she could bear any burden.

Marmee sat beside her on the sofa. She watched Beth's busy fingers for a moment.

"I was apprehensive about your taking on this project, I must admit, Beth," she said. "I thought you would push yourself too far and too fast, and feared the consequences. But I have to apologize. I underestimated your strength."

Beth's fingers faltered, and she looked up at Marmee. Pride shone in Marmee's eyes, and Beth felt a surge of happiness.

"I still see you as my bashful little girl, but you are my little woman," Marmee said with a smile. "I've always been proud of you, Beth. Of your sweetness, and helpfulness, and your understanding heart. Now I find that I am admiring your courage."

Beth dropped her eyes to her sewing. "I've only made a few calls," she said. "And sewed a few dolls back together. Compared to the work you do, and Father, and even Jo and Meg . . . well, it isn't much."

"Oh, but it is," Marmee said. "I know you pushed yourself because you did not want your sisters to bear the burden of Snow Dancer. You con-

quered your fears out of love. That is a great achievement." Marmee hugged Beth. "I just wanted you to know that I noticed it, that's all."

"Thank you, Marmee," Beth whispered.

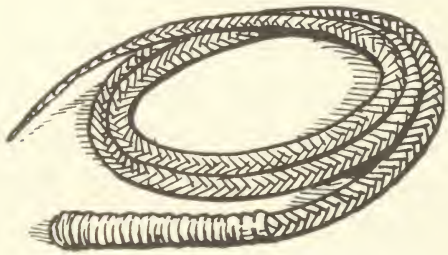
The door banged, and they heard Jo's impatient step in the hall. A moment later she burst into the parlor.

"Jo, must you bang in the house that way?" Marmee said, exasperated. "And where is our sugar?"

"Bless me, I forgot it," Jo said breathlessly. "I'm sorry, Marmee, but I have news. Beth, there's a stranger in town named Beedle. And he's looking everywhere for a runaway horse!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Buttermilk Bob



Beth felt her blood drain from her face. She half stood, as though she were going to run out into the night. "Snow Dancer!"

Still in her bonnet and cloak, Jo hugged Beth. "I'm sorry, dear heart."

"What happened? Does he know Snow Dancer is at the Tarbells'?"

Jo nodded, her eyes anxious as she looked at Beth. "He asked at the livery stable, and of course Mr. Pollard told him. He said it sounded like his horse, Beth. He's going out to the farm tomorrow,

for he said he was too tired to make the journey tonight, and would stay at the inn. I heard it all from Mr. Pollard himself."

"Is he . . . a nice man?" Beth asked.

Jo shook her head. "I don't know," she told her.

Meg and Amy had entered the parlor, and they stood silently by, watching Beth with concerned eyes.

"I know what you're all thinking," Beth said, reaching into her apron pocket for her handkerchief. "Of course this was going to happen, all along. And Snow Dancer belongs with his owner. I just thought . . ." Beth's voice faltered, ". . . that he was meant to stay, and I was meant to care for him, that's all. I can't explain it any better."

"You don't have to, dear," Jo said, drawing Beth's head against her shoulder. "We know."

The next day, Beth was up and dressed before the sun was up. She crept downstairs in the gray light. She wouldn't bother with breakfast, just tie on her bonnet and cape and slip out.

But to her surprise, there was a light shining under the parlor door. Beth pushed it open. Jo was sitting at the tea table, pouring tea. A stack of

thickly sliced bread was at her elbow. She looked up at Beth and smiled as though it were perfectly natural that the two of them should be awake before sunrise.

"I know where you're going, and I mean to go with you, so there shall be no arguing, please," Jo said, holding out a cup to Beth. "I only insist on one thing—that you take a bite before we go."

Beth took the cup gratefully. "Bless your heart, Jo. You're the best sister."

"I rather think you are, dearest, but let's not argue the point," Jo replied, spooning sugar into her tea. "There is something I've been putting off telling you, however. I'm afraid my story was rejected. I couldn't have given you money for the fund, anyway."

"It means more to me that you tried," Beth told Jo softly.

They ate quickly and left the house, walking briskly down the lane in the cold air. Warmed by the tea and the exercise, they made good time. It had not snowed in a week, and the roads were dry.

"I'm very glad it's dry for our walk, but I do wish it would snow for the party," Jo said, looking at the low, gray sky. "We plan to have a good sleigh

ride, and you can't do that very well without a good blanket of snow. I like the look of that sky, though."

"Why, the party is tomorrow, isn't it?" Beth said. "I'd forgotten." With all her worry and work, the idea of the party had flown from her head. How long ago it seemed that she had been so anxious about attending it!

Smoke curled from the Tarbell chimney as they walked up the road, for farmers rose early.

"Let's not disturb them yet," Beth proposed. "We can go straight to the barn. I just want to say goodbye to Snow Dancer and explain what's going to happen."

Jo nodded, for she was there to support Beth and to follow her wishes. They hurried to the barn.

A soft whinny told Beth that Snow Dancer recognized her step as she walked to the far stall.

"Good morning, Snow," she called softly. She reached into her pocket for the apple she'd remembered to tuck away before she left the house.

Snow Dancer pushed his head toward Beth's outstretched hand, and she gently stroked his muzzle. She fed him the apple, feeling his soft lips and whiskers on her palm.

"Perhaps the owner is a good man who misses his horse," Jo said in the quiet. "And perhaps Snow

Dancer has a nice warm barn to return to, with apples every day, and children who love to ride him."

"Perhaps," Beth said, rubbing her fingers along the horse's mane.

"Anyway, you'll have time for one last ride, I'll warrant," Jo said. "I don't think anyone would come out this early."

But a loud, bellowing voice made Beth turn in alarm. She exchanged a nervous glance with Jo. Snow Dancer jerked his head away and backed up in his stall. One of his hooves reached out and kicked the back wall.

"Don't worry, Snow Dancer," Beth told him, but his eyes rolled nervously and he did not calm at the sound of her voice.

"It must be the owner," Jo whispered as another shout reached their ears.

Beth turned and ran from the barn. She burst into the yard, shading her eyes from the rising sun.

A short, bandy-legged man was striding toward them from the house. His face was red with cold and anger. Mr. Tarbell ran behind him, trying to keep up.

"I've not stolen your horse!" Mr. Tarbell shouted.

"And I'd thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head around my family!"

"All I know is, my horse ended up in your barn," the red-faced man said as he marched on. Beth's heart chilled as she saw the long whip curled at his side. She flinched as he flourished it, the loud crack splitting the fresh morning air.

"Where are you hiding him?" the man shouted, his face beet red. "Why are you keeping him?"

Jo stood frozen by the barn door. But a surge of anger and determination rushed through Beth, and she stepped forward into the man's path.

"Because I asked him to," Beth said in a new, strong voice she didn't recognize. It cracked like the man's whip in the cold air. "And the horse isn't hidden. Surely you saw the notices in town. Now do stop accusing Mr. Tarbell, a man who's only done you a favor."

"And who are you, little miss?" The man pushed his face close to Beth. "And what's your interest here?"

Every muscle in her body wanted to shrink back. But Beth stood her ground.

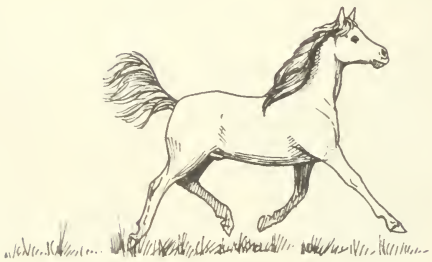
"My name is Beth March," she told him steadily. "I found Snow Dancer. And I mean to keep him!"

The man let out a harsh laugh. "Did you say

Snow Dancer? A fancy name for a no-account troublesome beast, I'd say. His name is Buttermilk Bob, and his worthless hide is going on the auction block tomorrow!"

CHAPTER NINE

A Promise



"No!" Beth cried. "You can't!"

"I beg your pardon, miss," the man said with a sneer. "I think my own horse is mine to do with what I please."

"Of course he is," Beth said, struggling to speak in a calmer tone. "But what if I wanted to buy him, Mr.—"

"Beedle's the name," the man said. "Yancy Beedle. Sure, missy, you can buy him, if the price is right. I'd be glad to get him off my hands."

"I don't quite have enough money yet to buy a

horse," Beth said hesitantly. "But I could raise it, if you—"

Yancy Beedle waved a hand. "Stop there, young miss. Why should I wait for the cash when I can get it myself in hand as soon as today?"

"But I promise you, if you'd only give me some time—" Beth started to plead, but Mr. Beedle cut her off.

"Time is for rich folks, miss," he said. "I'm selling that horse to the highest bidder as soon as I can. There's a country auction hereabouts this very afternoon, and that's where I'm heading. This horse has been nothing but trouble since I bought him from a neighboring farm. The family raised the worthless beast from a foal—he was the special pet of some young girl, and I reckon she spoilt him and that's why he's such an ill-tempered beast. He kicked up a ruckus from the day the reins were in my hands, and he never stopped," Beedle finished. "Now all I want is to get my money out of him."

"Perhaps he's trouble because you use that instead of a kind word," Beth told him, pointing to his whip.

Mr. Beedle's insolent gaze flicked over Beth. "Didn't your mamma teach you manners, missy?"

"Only to those who deserve them," Beth re-

torted tartly. She felt Jo start beside her, and Mr. Tarbell looked at her in amazement.

Indeed, Beth felt surprised at her actions. Her heart was pounding, and she thought she might faint. But the cruelty of the owner of Snow Dancer—she would *not* call him Buttermilk Bob!—had filled her with indignation.

"Beth," Jo said, stepping up next to her. "I'm sorry to say it, but it's no use. Mr. Beedle has the law on his side."

"That's right, miss. You have more sense than your friend, here," Mr. Beedle said.

"And she has twice your compassion, sir," Jo retorted sharply.

Mr. Beedle's face flushed. "Just stand out of my way, if you please."

Reluctantly Beth moved aside. Mr. Beedle headed into the barn. A moment later they heard the explosive sound of hooves smashing against the barn wall. A high whinny reached their ears.

"Snow Dancer!" Beth cried.

"You'd better keep her back, Miss Jo," Mr. Tarbell said steadily. "It could be dangerous if the horse starts to act up."

Jo took hold of Beth's shoulders. "Stay, Beth,"

she told her through tight lips. "You've got to bear it, dear."

Seconds later, Mr. Beedle emerged, leading Snow Dancer. He held onto the reins tightly while Snow Dancer's eyes rolled and he pawed the ground.

With one powerful arm, Beedle struck the horse on the flank with his whip. Snow Dancer tried to rear, but Beedle held him in check.

"Steady, Bob, you worthless piece of meat!" Beedle shouted. He struck him again, and Beth let out a scream.

Muscles quivered along Snow Dancer's flanks. His proud head was low, the harness held tight in Beedle's meaty hand. Tears rolled down Beth's cheeks. Her shoulders shook with sobs as she watched Beedle lead a reluctant, whinnying Snow Dancer toward his cart.

Just as Beedle began to tie the horse to the cart, Snow Dancer reared and plunged, whinnying and crying. His hooves flashed, and Beedle slashed at him again and again with the whip.

"No!" Beth screamed. She ran across the yard toward Snow Dancer. She heard Jo shout and saw Mr. Tarbell spring forward, but she didn't stop until she had come between Mr. Beedle's whip and Snow Dancer.

"Let me!" she shouted. Without waiting for his permission, she turned and faced Snow Dancer.

"Snow," she said calmly. She held out her hand.

Snow had backed up against the cart. Underneath his coat, Beth could see his muscles tremble as he struggled to remain still. He was poised to attempt to run, no matter how he was tied, no matter how long he was beaten. He would kill himself trying for freedom, Beth knew.

"Quiet now," Beth murmured, taking another step. "It's all right, dear friend. I'm going to make everything all right." She reached out her hand and placed it on his quivering flank. She rested her body against him. Still, she didn't touch the bridle. She just continued to stroke his coat.

She whispered against his flank, slowly moving toward his head. Beth wasn't conscious of Jo standing a few feet away, her hands clenched in anxiety, or of Mr. Tarbell keeping as close as he dared, waiting to see what the horse would do. Later their frightened faces would come to her, and she would realize that she had noticed them without really seeing them. Her whole mind and heart was directed at calming Snow Dancer's fear.

Beth inched forward until she was at Snow

Dancer's head. She rubbed his mane, and then his soft, velvety nose.

"You must go with him," she whispered. "You must obey him. It will be easier if you do it quietly. Please," she said as a sob escaped her. "Please, Snow Dancer. Let me lead you," she said, reaching for his bridle. "Let me do it, Snow."

She grasped the bridle. Snow Dancer batted his head against her gently, as though saying he would obey.

He trusted her. And she was delivering him into the hands of his enemy, the man who beat him.

But she had no choice. She had to lead him quietly, or he would be hurt even worse.

Tears streamed down Beth's face as she walked the few paces to the cart. She tied the reins securely around the iron hitch. Sobbing, she rested her head against him.

"That's right, missy. Good work," Beedle said, tightening the halter on the hitch.

Beth ignored him. She stroked Snow Dancer's silky mane and placed her lips as close to his ear as she could get.

"You'll always be mine, in my heart," Beth murmured. Her tears streaked through the dust on his neck. She had never gotten a chance to brush him

that morning. "I'm so sorry I have to do this, Snow. But Jo could be right—you'll find a new family to care for you. You'll have plenty to eat, and sweet green meadows to run in."

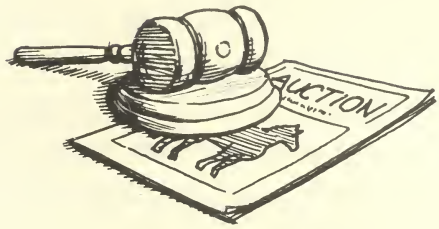
"I've got to be going, missy," Mr. Beedle yelled from the cart.

Beth pressed against Snow Dancer for the last time. "I promise you," she whispered, "I will make sure that you find a home as precious as mine."

Beth heard a *crack* as the cart took off with a jerk. Later, she realized the sound must have been Beedle cracking his whip. But Beth was sure, at that moment, it was the sound of her own heart breaking in two.

CHAPTER TEN

The Highest Bidder



Beth and Jo did not speak as they made their way home. Now that the incident was behind her, Beth could not stop shaking. She couldn't believe that she had spoken so sharply to a strange man, and leaped in front of a flashing whip. It was something Jo would do. Never in her life could she have imagined that she would have acted so boldly.

Jo's sympathy was silent, but Beth could feel it. After a bit, Jo slipped her arm through Beth's and hugged her close. That helped calm Beth's trembling hands. But her anger and sorrow still surged with every step.

The sun was higher in the sky now. It sparkled on the dew of the fields, and the birds began to sing their pleasure in a new morning. But Beth could not receive her usual pleasure from the sights and sounds of nature. Every time she recalled her last sight of Snow Dancer, she felt her heart breaking all over again.

Halfway home, they saw a horseman approaching. "It's Laurie," Jo said.

Laurie galloped up and dismounted. His face was marked with concern and worry. "What happened?" he asked. "I saw Snow Dancer tied to a cart as I came."

"His owner is taking him to the country auction this afternoon," Jo explained.

"Perhaps he'll find a good home, Beth," Laurie said gently as he walked with them, leading his horse.

"I'm afraid that he won't," Beth said in a choked voice. "Someone hard and mean will buy him, for he's known as a bad horse, and who buys bad horses, but bad men? And Snow Dancer already *has* found a good home," Beth continued. "In a just world, the Tarbells would be allowed to keep him. They had to sell their horse to keep their farm, and they need a good workhorse. Snow Dancer would be well

cared for. But instead, that man must whip him into submission and sell him to the highest bidder!"

Laurie and Jo were silent. Beth felt their sympathy and their concern, and she tried to smile, but couldn't.

"I betrayed him," she said. "Did you see the way he walked behind the cart, with his head hung low, as if all his spirit was gone?"

"That Beedle man is a blackguard," Jo said darkly.

But it was my fault, too! I did that to him, Beth thought as they walked. *But how can I make sure he goes to a good home? If only Mr. Beedle had let me buy him!*

Before they left the farm, the Tarbells had insisted on refunding most of the money that Beth had paid, since they'd only kept Snow Dancer for two weeks. At home, her jar was stuffed full of donations from Miss March's Doll Infirmary. But Beth knew it wasn't enough to buy a horse outright.

An idea occurred to her as they turned down their street. It was true, she didn't have enough to offer Mr. Beedle. But what about at an auction? Mrs. Wilkins from down the street had told Marmee about getting a new dining room set for ten dollars, just because no one else had wanted it.

What if she bid on Snow Dancer?

Beth's heart pounded as Jo swung open their gate. She couldn't imagine how she would find the courage to go to a country auction, full of rough strangers. And in her wildest dreams she could not conceive of how she'd be able to raise her voice and bid against gruff men. Surely she'd used up her allotment of nerve already that morning.

But she'd promised Snow Dancer, and she would find a way.

Later that morning, Beth stepped into the gloom of the livery stable. She blinked until her eyes adjusted.

"Mr. Pollard?"

The stable owner emerged from behind a carriage with a polishing cloth in his hand. "Why, if it isn't little Beth. Come to see if any more dolls need mending?"

"Not today," Beth said. "I was wondering if you knew where the country auction would be this afternoon."

"Why, it's over in Whitcomb," Mr. Pollard said. "It starts in an hour, I believe."

"Oh," Beth said, disappointed. Whitcomb was three towns away. She'd never be able to walk it in time!

Mr. Pollard looked at her carefully. "Did you have a mind to go?"

"I thought I might," Beth said weakly.

Mr. Pollard nodded, as if a thirteen-year-old girl wanting to attend an auction was an everyday occurrence. "Well, I could give you a ride. I'm headed over myself."

"You could? I'd be so grateful!" Beth's eyes shone.

"It's me who's grateful to you," Mr. Pollard said gently. "You stitched up my little girl's doll so nicely, and then spent all that time talking to her, deciding on a name. Susanna has been a lonely little girl since her baby brother died. I'll never forget your kindness to her." Mr. Pollard cleared his throat. "Now, just let me finish this chore, and I'll hitch up the team."

In only minutes, Beth was jouncing along the road with Mr. Pollard. She found the tall, lanky man easy to talk to, and she confided her story about Snow Dancer.

Mr. Pollard frowned when he heard how much money she had, but then he shrugged. "Stranger things have happened at auctions," he said. "Depends on who wants a horse, and what kind they want. I wish you good luck, Beth."

A few fat flakes were beginning to twinkle down as they reached Whitcomb. Mr. Pollard left his cart in a field near the building where the auction was to be held. The crowded room was a blur of cigar smoke and noise, and it frightened Beth. But Mr. Pollard found her a seat near the front, and got her a program. He even explained how to bid.

"Just waggle your program like this," he told her. "Make sure the auctioneer sees you, now. Don't be shy."

That seemed like a difficult task to Beth, but she nodded, grasping her program tightly.

"Speak up, now," he said. "And good luck. I have to go outside and inspect a few carriages that are coming up for auction. I'll try to be back before the sale starts. But it can get a mite crowded, so don't fret if I don't make it back to your seat. I won't leave for Concord without you. I don't like the look of the sky, and I'd like to be back before the snow is too deep."

"Thank you," Beth said.

Mr. Pollard disappeared in the crowd just as a portly man headed for the podium. He banged his gavel, and the auction began.

At first Beth despaired, for she was sure she would fail. She could barely understand the auction-

eer, he talked so fast! And things were bid on and hauled away with frightening speed. Why, the auctioneer sold boards from a dismantled barn in about thirty seconds! If he could sell a building in less than a minute, how long would it take to sell a horse?

But after twenty minutes, Beth felt she was beginning to catch up to the auction's fast pace. Just then the auctioneer dispensed with a plow, and the first horse was ushered in.

It was Snow Dancer! Beedle led him in, keeping his hand tight on the bridle. Beth's eyes dimmed when she saw poor Snow with his head down. But just then, Snow shied a few steps sideways, and when Beedle pulled on his harness, Snow stamped his foot and then tried to kick the man. Furiously, Beedle yanked on the harness again, and the horse tossed his head and showed his teeth.

Beth sat up straight and clutched her program. She heard the murmur behind her. The farmers had noticed Snow Dancer's kick and how tightly Beedle was holding the bridle. No one wanted to bid on an unruly horse.

There might be hope for her!

"This is a fine horse, an excellent working horse from north of Boston," the auctioneer began. He proceeded to praise Snow Dancer's withers and legs

and strength, but most of the bidders had already examined the horses outside to be sure of what they were getting.

Finally the auctioneer began the bidding. Beth waved her program timidly, and he pointed at her.

"First bid, the little lady on the right."

She saw Beedle's eyes search for her. He looked startled to see her. But his surprise changed to a greedy smile when someone bid from the back of the room.

Beth bid five dollars more by waving her program. But she was outbid a second later.

And she had no more money. She had lost, and so soon! She'd been so foolish to think she could ever have enough.

The auctioneer dared the crowd to raise the bid. He praised the horse again, and tried cajoling them.

Beth twisted around, trying to guess who was bidding on Snow Dancer. At least she would able to see Snow Dancer's new owner.

A rough-looking man with cold eyes watched the crowd carefully. Beth's gaze moved on, hoping it wasn't him.

The auctioneer's gavel came down. *Sold!*

And then he pointed to the man with the cold gray eyes!

Beth pushed toward the door. She had to say good-bye to Snow Dancer! She had to see him one last time before the horrible man took him away.

But the hall was crowded, and Beth was hampered in her attempts to snake through the crowd. People were huddled near the podium, staring at the auctioneer, and they did not hear her gentle "excuse me, please" or feel her tug on their sleeve.

At last Beth burst into the cold air. She looked about wildly in the now whirling snow. Mr. Beedle was just counting a roll of bills.

"Where is he? Where is Snow Dancer?" Beth asked him wildly.

"Bob? Gone," Mr. Beedle said. "Glad to see his hindquarters, I am. Did you see how he kicked in there? Almost spoiled my chances."

"But who bought him? What manner of man?" Beth asked desperately. "Did he seem at all kind to you? Will he treat him well?"

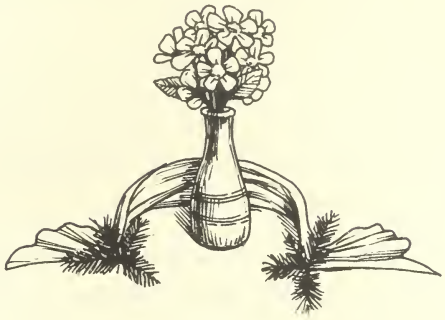
Mr. Beedle stared at her. "I have no idea," he said. He waved the bundle of money in her face. "This is what matters, missy. Take your pennies and go home. This is a man's game."

He turned. Beth held back a sob so huge she was afraid that if she let it go she would break apart.

She had promised Snow Dancer that she would make certain he was going to a good home. It was the very least she could do. She had let him down for the last time. And now he was gone forever.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Life of the Party



Snow continued to fall all that evening, delighting Jo and the rest of her sisters. Beth told her story simply and received comfort and kisses, but they had no time to mourn her loss of Snow Dancer. The party was to be the next day, and the night was spent in festooning the halls with ivy and evergreen, making punch, and frosting cookies. Beth worked as hard as her sisters, but she could not sing and laugh with them. She felt numb and exhausted, and couldn't wait until she could slip under her soft coverlet and cry into her pillow.

When Beth kissed her mother good night at last, Marmee whispered "Stay a moment, dear," in her ear. Obediently, Beth lingered after Jo, Meg, and Amy had climbed the stairs to bed.

Marmee drew an arm around her and hugged her close. "I know how you suffered today, Beth. Now will come your trial, dear. Our character is formed by how we bear our sorrows, not by the sorrows themselves, for they come to all."

"I'll try to bear mine bravely, Marmee," Beth told her as Marmee stroked her hair.

"You have made a good beginning, for this evening you helped us all and didn't let your private woe dampen your sisters' happiness."

"I tried, but oh, Marmee, I think my heart is broken," Beth told her. The tears she hadn't shed suddenly slipped down her cheeks.

"My own dear Beth," Marmee said, drawing her close. "You have a great love of the natural world, and it gives you great joy. But it is like anything we love—it has the power to hurt us, too. You must take the hurt with the pleasures, I'm afraid."

"Must I go to the party tomorrow?" Beth asked. "May I stay in my room? I'll make a tray for myself. I won't be any trouble."

Marmee sighed. She lifted Beth's chin to look

into her face. She wiped away a few of the the tears that glistened on Beth's cheeks.

"Attending the party is what I mean about bearing up under sorrow," she told her gently. "We will miss you if you remain upstairs, Beth, and your sisters' pleasures will be diminished, for they'll worry. Especially Jo."

"I wouldn't want Jo to worry," Beth murmured.

"I shan't forbid you to remain upstairs," Marmee said. "But I do request you to attend. How can life sustain us, if we don't rise to meet it?"

Beth couldn't bear to disappoint Marmee or worry her sisters. All she wanted to do was lie in bed and think of Snow Dancer. But her sisters were so looking forward to the party! She couldn't bear to dim their happiness, even a bit.

"I'll go, Marmee," she said softly, and was rewarded with a knowing look and a gentle kiss.

Beth regretted her decision the very next evening. She stood in her room in her best gown of deep blue, her new ribbon in her hair, and despaired. She heard the murmur of conversation and laughter from downstairs.

Beth scooped up Castor and Pollux and hugged them to her. "What could I have been thinking?"

she murmured against Castor's soft fur. "How can I walk into that happy throng?"

"Beth?" Jo stood at the door. Smiling tenderly, she walked toward her and slipped an arm around her waist. "I'll walk down with you, dearest Beth," she whispered. "And I won't leave your side, if that will make it easier."

Beth leaned against Jo, drawing comfort and strength from her sister. "I'm ready," she said.

"That's my girl," Jo said approvingly. "But let's leave the kittens here, shall we? Aunt March shall have a fit if her best silk dress is clawed to ribbons."

Beth laughed softly and slipped her arm into Jo's. They walked downstairs together. The hallway looked so festive, festooned with evergreen, red ribbons, and flowers massed in vases. Jo paused at the parlor door. The conversation and laughter were louder now. She raised her eyebrows at Beth in a question. Beth straightened her shoulders and nodded.

Jo threw open the door. Lights and colors dazzled Beth for a moment and she shrank back, as she usually did, from the blur of faces.

But then the blur cleared and she saw Laurie, his black eyes shining as he nodded and smiled at her. Beside him stood his grandfather, Mr. Laurence, for whom Beth often played music in the afternoons.

Next to them Beth saw Mr. Pollard, who was holding Susanna's hand. Mr. Quince waved at her kindly. And then she saw all the Kenniwig children, whom Jo was now calling "The Superlatives." They were crowded together in one group, as usual, and all talking at once. Mrs. Jenkins and Mr. Jenkins were deep in conversation with Mrs. Kenniwig while their granddaughter bounced on Mr. Jenkins's knee. She waved her doll at Beth.

Colonel Drabble bowed and smiled at Beth. "Good evening, Miss March. And how are your patients this evening?"

"They are all resting comfortably, thank you sir," Beth said with a smile that deepened her dimples. "Are your daughters here?" she asked, craning her neck. "I was wondering about Drucie's poor ankle."

"Merely a small sprain, nothing to worry about. She's well wrapped, and with her sisters, Abigail, Belinda, and Caroline, over by the sweets, of course," Colonel Drabble said. "Let me escort you. They're all longing to see you."

Beth slipped her arm into Colonel Drabble's. She waved across the room at the Tarbells with their baby and young son, Ned. She would have to remember to ask them about Ned's cold, and their ailing cow. Even Mr. Feidler from the music shop

had come, with his wife and young daughter. Beth had sewed an outfit for little Anna's doll, and Anna held it up for inspection.

Beth greeted the four Drabble daughters and was immediately engrossed in a conversation about favorite fairy tales. But the Kenniwigs soon interrupted, drawing Beth away for her to show them her music. And then there were the Jenkinses to greet, and ask about their niece, who had had a bout of influenza right before her sixteenth birthday party.

Beth moved easily from group to group, friendly face to friendly face. There were so many questions to ask, and answers to give. Through her visits, she had learned so much about the details of her neighbors' lives. There were sicknesses to ask about, good tidings to hear, and Christmas plans to be discussed. She forgot her own sorrows as she listened and laughed.

Beth didn't notice as the time flew. Jo had long ago left her side. It wasn't until Beth was pouring a glass of punch and chatting about plays with Abigail Drabble that she noticed her dear sister beaming at her from across the room.

Beth smiled back at Jo. Laughter and conversation swirled around her in a blur of noise and color.

But she wasn't afraid or nervous. She did not want to escape to her room. At that moment, she had realized something important.

She was among friends.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Silver Moon, Crystal Snow

"Are you ready, Josephine?" Laurie called across the crowd.

"Ready, Theodore!" Jo answered merrily.

Beth glanced out the window. The blanket of white snow and the crisp air had made perfect sleighing weather. Now she could hear the jingle of bells from outside.

Jo clapped her hands. "Theodore Laurence and Josephine March hereby announce that we are recruiting volunteers for a sleigh ride under the stars. We plan to carol our way around Concord, singing

as loudly as we can. Marmee has promised to heat up some chocolate upon our return. Mr. Laurence, Colonel Drabble, and Mr. Pollard have generously loaned their sleighs, and there is room for all."

"Hurrah!" Robert Kenniwig shouted as he sprang to his feet. "What a capital idea!"

"Isn't it the most perfect evening for sleighing?" Kate called with a happy laugh.

Children gleefully jumped up and ran to their parents, begging permission to go. Colonel Drabble was heard loudly assuring each child that he had room for all. Ned Tarbell promised his mother that his cold was "ever so much better." And Susanna Pollard asked if her doll, Angelina, was invited.

"Well then?" Jo called above the happy din. "Are we ready? Anyone who wishes to stay warm by the fire has my unqualified disapproval!"

The room exploded with laughter and cheers, and Aunt March thumped her stick. "I'll risk it, Josephine, for I'm not moving from this chair!"

"I'll stay with you, madam," Mr. Jenkins said gallantly. "My sleighing days are over. I much prefer a fire."

The young people all declared their intention to go, but many of the older adults followed Aunt March's lead and opted to stay in the warm, bright

parlor. Beth hesitated. A sleigh ride would be jolly, but she felt she'd had enough excitement for one evening.

"Oh, no, my girl, you're coming with me and Laurie," Jo said, steering her away from the fire. "We've got up a merry crew, and Meg and Amy are coming, and I won't take no for an answer, my girl."

"I thought I'd stay and play carols for Marmee and the guests," Beth started to explain, but Jo shook her head vigorously.

"Nonsense, we need your sweet voice, or we'll go so far off key we shall never find the tune again. You know how hopeless I am! So please do come, Bethy," Jo pleaded.

Beth smiled at Jo's eagerness. "Of course I'll come, if you wish me to. Just place me between you and Meg or Amy, and I'll be content."

After a scramble for scarves and gloves and bonnets, and many a wail of "where *is* that other glove!" as well as a number of motherly admonitions to "bundle up warm, now," the parties stepped out into a crystal night of deep white snow, navy sky, and a full silver moon.

Beth's heart felt full, and she blinked away sudden tears. She had first seen Snow Dancer on a night similar to this, when the earth seemed fashioned of

crystal and diamonds. Tonight he was in a strange stall, bewildered and alone.

Perhaps not, she told herself. *Perhaps he has traveled to a nice farm, with a big family who will love and care for him, as Jo says. I mustn't dwell on the worst of possibilities!*

Beth climbed into the sleigh next to Meg. Jo tucked a warm blanket around both of them, then climbed in. Amy squeezed herself in on the other side next to Meg, and the merry bells jangled as Laurie took the reins.

Laurie half stood and announced to the other sleighs, "Now, Miss Jo March will start us off with the first carol."

"You are a cruel boy, Teddy Laurence," Jo whispered, her eyes glinting at Laurie, who only laughed.

But Jo opened her mouth obediently, and sent them into fits of giggling while they tried to keep up with her off-key rendition of "Good King Wenceslas."

An hour later their noses and cheeks were rosy with cold, and everyone began to think longingly of the chocolate being warmed at the March house.

"Before we go back, let's head out for a last sprint along a country road," Laurie proposed. "It's too fine a night to shut ourselves in!"

Colonel Drabble and Mr. Pollard jingled their bells in agreement, and the three sleighs took off.

Jo started them off on another carol, and the snowy lanes rushed by. Beth tilted her head back and drank in the sight of the stars. Her heart still ached for Snow Dancer. She'd never forgive herself for letting him down, but she didn't see how she could have acted differently.

Jo would have found a way, Beth told herself.

Jo bent her head near Beth so that Beth could hear her. "You look sad," she said. "Are you thinking of Snow Dancer?"

Beth bit her lip. "I can't help thinking that you would have done better, Jo. You're stronger than I am. You would have stamped your foot and been determined that you would find a way."

"I might have stamped my foot, but I would not have done anything differently," Jo told her soberly. "You did the best you could, Beth. Snow Dancer can't ask for more than that. Nobody can. Take comfort in that thought, and in the hope that things may change."

"What can possibly change?" Beth asked, staring at the woods as they trotted by.

Jo squeezed her hand. "Anything, dear. It's a season for miracles, isn't it?"

"Why, this is the road to the Tarbell farm," Meg said suddenly.

"So it is," Laurie said. "Perhaps we should turn round here."

Mr. Pollard drew up beside them. His sleigh was filled with the Kenniwig family, who all called out, "Isn't it glorious?" and, "Have you ever seen such a crystal clear evening?" at the same time.

"Hush, back there," Mr. Pollard said good-humoredly. "I have been instructed by Mr. Tarbell, up in the next sleigh, that hot cider is awaiting us all in his farmhouse. His Aunt Emma prepared some, just in case we came by. It will warm us for the drive home."

"Lead on!" Laurie called.

The runners glided smoothly over the snow as they approached the Tarbell farm. Beth hadn't protested, but she dearly wished to be on her way home again. Thoughts of Snow Dancer had intruded on her all evening, but she had managed to push them away and be cheerful, for a time. Now, visiting the farm where he had stayed, she would not be able to escape them.

The sleighs glided to a stop near the barn. While everyone climbed down in the starlight, Beth

saw Mr. Tarbell hurry into the barn. She supposed he was anxious about his ailing cow.

Beth looked away, at the meadow where she had learned to gallop without fear. And beyond lay the woods, where she and Snow Dancer had stepped through an enchanted world of forest creatures and stillness broken only by the creaking of branches and the sound of the wind.

Snow Dancer felt so close. She almost swore she heard his soft whinny.

Beth turned. The barn doors were now flung wide, and Mr. Tarbell led a white horse across the snow.

"Snow Dancer!" Beth cried. She ran forward, hurrying to his side. Snow flicked his ears at her, the way he always greeted her. She rubbed his nose and looked at Mr. Tarbell wonderingly.

"How?" she asked. She couldn't form another word.

Mr. Tarbell grinned. "Ask your young friend Mr. Laurence."

Beth searched out Laurie in the crowd of people. Everyone was watching her with smiles on their faces. Meg beamed, Amy was hopping with excitement, and moonlight glittered on the tears in her dear Jo's eyes.

"Now, don't look at me," Laurie said merrily. "It was Jo's idea."

"No, Teddy," Jo said, rapidly swiping at her eyes as though she had something in them. "It was you who came and told me that you'd convinced your grandfather to buy Snow Dancer—"

Beth gasped.

"—and let us keep him until we could pay him off," Mr. Tarbell finished. "We'll be needing a horse, come spring, especially. And we've been relying on neighbors to get around as it is."

"B—but the horrid man with the cold eyes bought him," Beth stammered.

Laurie laughed. "What do you think of that description, Mr. Nast?"

A tall man emerged from the barn. "I like it. Makes me sound like a desperado." His eyes twinkled at Beth, and suddenly, the "horrid man with the cold eyes" turned into a kind face with a friendly grin.

"Beth, meet our new groom, Ben Nast," Laurie said politely. "Mr. Nast, this is Beth March, who found Snow Dancer."

"Pleased to meet you, miss," Ben Nast said. "I brought Snow Dancer out here and fixed him up

real nice with some sweet hay and plenty of water. He was a mite temperamental on the way, but he calmed down as soon as we came to the farm."

"You were glad to be back, Snow Dancer," Beth murmured, stroking the horse's neck.

"And you must come visit him, and ride him, whenever you like," Mr. Tarbell told her.

Beth's vision dimmed as she gazed at her sisters, and Laurie, and the new friends she had made. At last her gaze returned to rest on Jo.

"Thank you," she said simply. "Knowing Snow Dancer is safe is the best Christmas present I've ever received."

"It was so very hard to keep the secret," Amy burst out. "I thought someone would slip at the party. But everyone wanted it to be a surprise."

"Isn't this the jolliest surprise ever?" Robert Kenniwig called.

"The very jolliest?" Kate Kenniwig echoed.

"You can imagine how difficult it was for *us* to keep silent," Ruth said with a laugh.

"It was the best and jolliest surprise, ever," Beth told them, beaming.

"What say we have that cider?" Mr. Tarbell asked, and everyone began to head for the house.

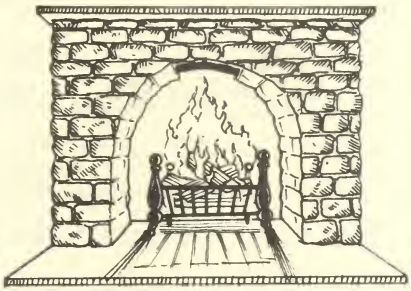
Beth led Snow Dancer back to his stall. Mr.

Nast hung back, waiting, while she pushed the latch closed and gave him a last kiss on the nose.

"There," she murmured. "You've come home at last. Isn't it the best place to be?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Best Place to Be



It was close to ten o'clock when the March sisters and Marmee bid goodbye to the guests. The cookies and cakes were gone, and the punch bowl was empty. The Kenniwigs had pronounced the party "rip-roaring good—and don't you think it was simply the most splendid party ever thrown?"

And now it was time for the sisters to sit by the fire with Laurie and heave a collective sigh of happy fatigue.

"I'm sure I can't move," Jo said, snuggling over a last sip of hot chocolate.

"There are so many dishes to wash," Amy said with a yawn.

"Dishes are for tomorrow morning," Marmee announced. "I decree that we enjoy our evening till the bitter end."

"Here, here!" Meg seconded, placing a pillow behind her head.

"Well, I agree with the Kenniwigs," Laurie declared. "I say the March Christmas party was a riproaring success."

"I like the ending best," Beth said softly, leaning against Marmee's knee. "Seeing Snow Dancer safe was the best surprise! But I must confess that what came before wasn't as terrible as I'd imagined. I'd rather dreaded the party, I'm afraid."

"No!" Jo cried, her eyes twinkling merrily. "We had no idea, Beth. We thought you were longing for it."

"We know how much you long to shine at large gatherings," Meg teased.

Beth laughed softly. "I suppose I was a goose."

"Goose or no, I hereby crown Miss Beth March the belle of the ball," Laurie announced. He plucked one of the ivy wreaths Amy had fashioned to surround the white candles and placed it on Beth's hair.

"We didn't mean to push you to come, Beth,"

Jo told her after the laughter subsided. "It's just that you're so dear and sweet that we think it only right to share you a bit with the world."

"The world is a little less frightening to me tonight," Beth said thoughtfully. "Oh, I haven't changed my nature. I would still rather be sitting here quietly with these faces that I love—and Father's—than be in a crowded room. But I've learned a lesson. Behind those stout oak doors and fierce expressions, people are just as much in need of love and attention as dolls and kittens and horses."

"And you do so well at taking care of them all," Marmee told her.

"I'm not sure about that," Beth said. "It was Laurie and Jo who came up with the idea of how to save Snow Dancer. They found a way."

"I beg to differ, young lady," Laurie said. "It was your concern about the Tarbells that led us to think of them. 'In a just world,' you said, they would keep the horse. I welcome the opportunity to act in a small way to bring justice to the world. Anybody would. But you guided me, Beth."

"And you *did* find a way, for a time, Beth," Meg pointed out. "Look at all you did. You started a business, knocked on doors—"

"You went to that auction and bid, all by your-

self!" Amy said. "I never would have had the courage."

"You stood up to that horrible Beedle man," Jo said, shuddering. "Don't you remember that red face and that whip! I cowered behind my Beth on that morning, and she marched right up to him without a trace of fear!"

"This adventure has had a heroine, Beth," Laurie told her gently. "It was you."

Behind him, Jo raised her cup to toast her, and Meg and Amy smiled, love shining on their faces. She felt Marmee's hand softly stroke her hair.

"Well, if I *am* a heroine, I'm one who much prefers sitting by the fire," Beth answered with a laugh.

Laurie smiled at her fondly. "And that makes you all the braver," he said.

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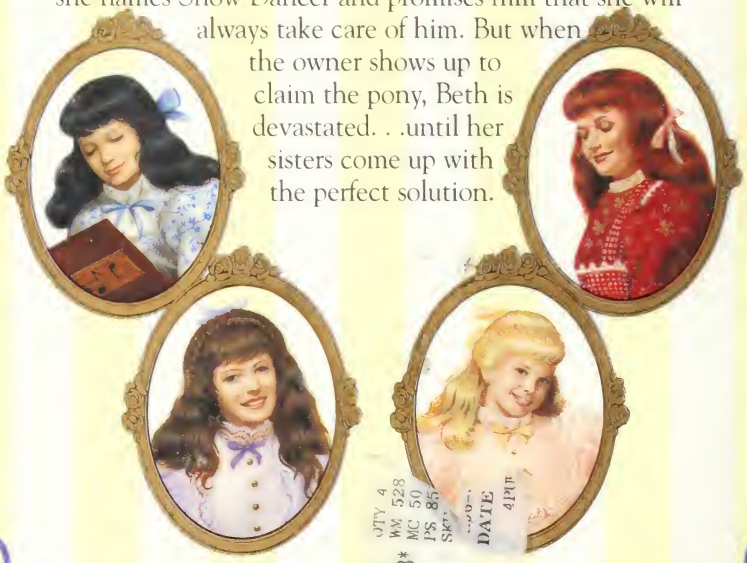

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